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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FEBRUARY 1961
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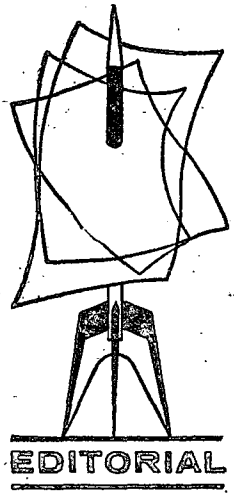

The folk-tales of devilish footprints appearing in the midst of open plains or on top of inaccessible roofs always seem to originate in far-off places—Wales or Brittany or isolated villages high in the Andes. Perhaps the Devil likes these lonely outposts, or perhaps it is just that a footprint in such an out-of-the-way place usually isn't calipered or photographed.

So it becomes fairly easy to smile and say, "Oh, another Devil's footprint, eh?"

But when such a footprint appears in a highly populated area of the state of New Jersey it is not quite so easy to shrug it off.

This particular Devil is not new. Matter of fact, he has been on the prowl in southern Jersey for more than 100 years. The Jersey Devil, as he is fondly known, is seen most often in the coastal counties—Atlantic, Cumberland, Cape May, Camden.

He reveals himself by footprints—cloven-hoofed, naturally, larger than a man's, in fields of otherwise virgin snow, or on impossibly high rooftops. The prints are usually 80 feet apart. They have been photographed. The Devil has also been seen leaping through the air at fantastic speeds. He has been heard screaming in the coastal swamps.

There is a local legend accounting for the Jersey Devil's origin. He was born, the story goes, to a Mrs. Leeds, who lived in Atlantic County many years ago. In the times of her pregnancy when she was feeling particularly poorly, Mrs. Leeds was wont to say she did not want the child at all. One day—an especially bad day, no doubt—she is alleged to have remarked that she would prefer it if the stork brought her a devil, rather than a child.

Jersey storks being obliging creatures, one flew over that night and deposited a baby-sized imp. Mrs. Leeds, her suddenly-motherly heart touched at the wee one's appearance, raised him till he was big enough to fend for himself. When he grew up he became a neighborhood nuisance, and his mother died of worry about him.

But if you ask me, what really happened was that this devil-child started making muddy footprints on his mother's clean kitchen floor one rainy winter's day, and she said, "Why don't you go and make them dirty footprints somewhere's else besides my kitchen?"—and so the Devil did.—And has been ever since.—NL.

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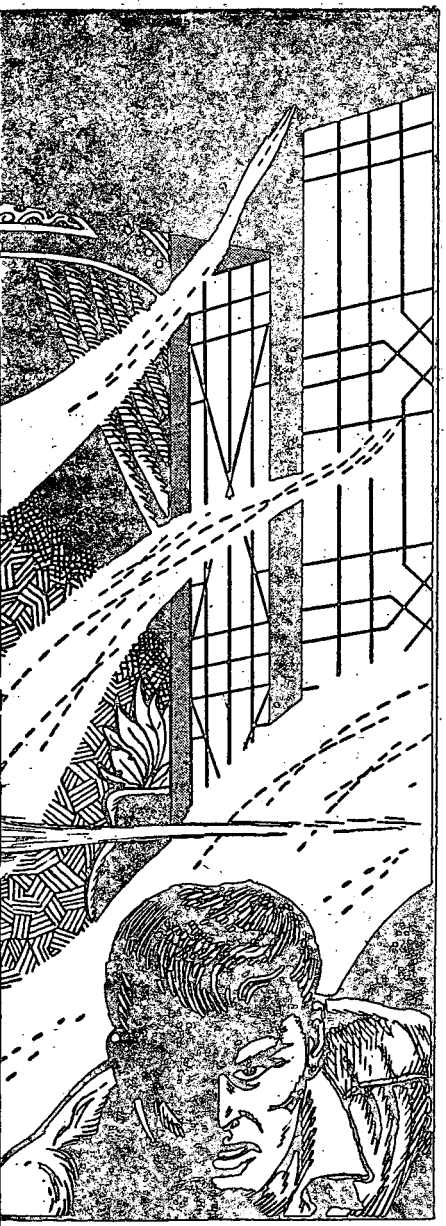

WORLDS of the IMPERIUM

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrator ADKINS

(Part One of Three Parts)

I

I STOPPED in front of a shop with a small wooden sign which hung from a wrought-iron spear projecting from the weathered stone wall. On it the word ANTIKVARIAT was lettered in spidery gold against dull black, and it creaked as it swung in the night wind. Below it a metal grating covered a dusty window with a display of yellowed etchings, woodcuts, and lithographs, and a faded mezzotint. Some of the buildings in the pictures looked familiar, but here they stood in open fields, or perched

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on hills overlooking a harbor crowded with sails. The ladies in the pictures wore great bell-like skirts and bonnets with ribbons, and carried tiny parasols, while dainty-footed horses pranced before carriages in the background.

It wasn't the prints that interested me though, or even the heavy gilt frame embracing a tarnished mirror at one side; it was the man whose reflection I studied in the yellowed glass, a dark man wearing a tightly-belted grey trench-coat that was six inches too long. He stood with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and stared into a darkened window fifty feet from me.

He had been following me all day.

At first I thought it was coincidence when I noticed the man on the bus from Bromma, then studying theatre announcements in the hotel lobby while I registered, and half an hour later sitting three tables away sipping coffee while I ate a hearty dinner.

I had discarded that theory a long time ago. Five hours had passed and he was still with me as I walked through the Old Town, medieval Stockholm still preserved on an island in the middle of the city. I had walked past shabby windows crammed with copper pots, ornate silver, duelling pistols, and worn cavalry sabres; very quaint in the afternoon sun, but grim reminders of a ruder day of violence after midnight. Over the echo of my footsteps in the silent narrow streets the other steps came quietly behind, hurrying when I hurried, stopping when I stopped. Now the man stared into the dark window and waited, the next move was up to me.

I was lost. Twenty years is a long time to remember the tortuous turnings of the streets of the Old Town. I took my guide book from my pocket and turned to the map in the back. My fingers were clumsy.

I craned my neck up at the stone tablet set in the corner of the building; it was barely legible: Master-Samuelsgatan. I found the name on the folding map and saw that it ran for three short blocks, ending at Gamla Storgatan; a dead end. In the dim light it was difficult to see the fine detail on the map; I twisted the book around and got a clearer view; there appeared to be another tiny street, marked with crosslines, and labelled Guldsmedstrappan. I tried to remember my Swedish; *trappan* meant stir. The Goldsmith's Stairs, running from Master Samuelsgatan to Hundgatan, another tiny street. It seemed to lead to the lighted area near the palace; it looked like my only route out. I dropped the book

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back into my pocket and moved off casually toward the stairs of the Goldsmith. I hoped there was no gate across the entrance.

My shadow waited a moment, then followed. Slowly as I was ambling, I gained a little on him. He seemed in no hurry at all. I passed more tiny shops, with ironbound doors and worn stone sills, and then saw that the next doorway was an open arch with littered granite steps ascending abruptly. I paused idly, then turned in. Once past the portal, I bounded up the steps at top speed. Six leaps, eight, and I was at the top and darting to the left toward a deep doorway. There was just a chance I'd cleared the top of the stair before the dark man had reached the bottom. I stood and listened. I heard the scrape of shoes. then heavy breathing from the direction of the stairs a few feet away. I waited, breathing with my mouth wide open, trying not to pant audibly. After a moment the steps moved away. The proper move for my silent companion would be to cast about quickly for my hiding place, on the assumption that I had concealed myself close by. He would be back this way soon.

I risked a glance. He was moving quickly along, looking sharply about, with his back to me. I pulled off my shoes and without taking time to think about it, stepped out. I made it to the stairs in three paces, and faded out of sight as the man stopped to turn back. I leaped down three steps at a time; I was halfway down when my foot hit a loose stone, and I flew the rest of the way.

I hit the cobblestones shoulder first, and followed up with my head. I rolled over and scrambled to my feet, my head ringing. I clung to the wall by the foot of the steps as the pain started. Now I was getting mad, and to hell with strategy. I heard the soft-shod feet coming down the stairs, and gathered myself to jump him as he came out. The footsteps hesitated just before the arch, then the dark round head with the uncut hair peered out. I swung a haymaker—and missed. He darted into the street and turned, fumbling in his overcoat. I assumed he was trying to get a gun, and aimed a kick at his mid-section. I had better luck this time; I connected solidly, and had the satisfaction of hearing him gasp in agony. I hoped he hurt as bad as I did. Whatever he was fumbling for came free then, and he backed away, holding the thing to his mouth.

"One-oh-nine, where in bloody blazes are you?" he said in a harsh voice, glaring at me. He had an odd accent. I realized the thing was some sort of micro-

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phone. "Come in, one-oh-nine, this job's going to pieces. . . ." He backed away, talking, eyes on me. I leaned against the wall; I hurt too bad to be very aggressive. There was no one else in sight. His soft shoes made whispering sounds on the paving stones. Mine lay in the middle of the street where I had dropped them when I fell.

Then there was a sound behind me. I whirled, and saw the narrow street almost blocked by a huge van. I let my breath out with a sigh of relief. Here was help . . .

Two men jumped down from the cab, and without hesitation stepped up to me, took my arms and escorted me toward the rear of the van. They wore tight white uniforms, and said nothing.

"I'm all right," I said. "Grab that man . . ." About that time I realized he was following along, talking excitedly to the man in white, and that the grip on my arms was more of a restraint than a support. I dug in my heels and tried to pull away. I remembered suddenly that the Stockholm police don't wear white uniforms.

I might as well not have bothered. One of them unclipped a thing like a tiny aerosol bomb from his belt and sprayed it in my face. I felt myself go limp. I was still conscious, but my feet dragged as they hauled me around to the back of the van, up a ramp, pushed me into a chair. I was dimly aware of the ramp being pulled in, the doors closing. I was fading but not yet out; I shouted after them, but they didn't answer. I heard more clicks and the sounds of things being moved; then the purr of an engine. There was a sensation of motion, very smooth, nothing more. I tried to yell, gave it up. I gathered my strength and tried to get out of the chair; I couldn't make it. It was too hard to keep my eyes open. My last thought as consciousness left me was that they could have killed me there in the deserted street as easily as they had kidnapped me.

II

THERE was a scratching sound which irritated me. I tried unsuccessfully to weave it into a couple of dreams before my subconscious gave up. I was lying on my back, eyes closed; I couldn't think where I was. I remembered a frightening dream about being followed, and then as I became aware of pain in my shoulder and head, my eyes snapped open. I was lying on a cot at the side of a small office; the scratching came from the desk where a dapper man in a white uniform sat writing. There

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was a humming sound and a feeling of motion.

I sat up. At once the man behind the desk looked up, rose, and walked over to me. He drew up a chair and sat down.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said in a clipped British accent. "I am Chief Captain Winter. You need merely assist in giving me some routine information, after which you will be assigned comfortable quarters." He said all this in a smooth lifeless way, as though he'd been through it before. Then he looked directly at me for the first time.

"I must apologize for the callousness with which you were handled; it was not my intention. . . . However," his tone changed, "you must excuse the operative; he was uninformed."

Chief Captain Winter opened a notebook and lolled back in his chair with pencil poised. "Where were you born, Mr. Bayard?"

They must have been through my pockets, I thought; they know my name.

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

The Chief Captain raised an eyebrow. His uniform was immaculate, and brilliantly jewelled decorations sparkled on his chest.

"Of course you are confused at this moment, Mr. Bayard, but everything will be explained to you carefully in due course. I am an Imperial Officer, duly authorized to interrogate subjects under detention. He smiled soothingly. "Now please state your birthplace."

I said nothing. I didn't feel like answering any questions; I had too many of my own to ask first. I couldn't place the fellow's accent; this bothered me because the study of dialects and accents has been a hobby of mine for a long time. He was an Englishman, but I couldn't have said from what part of England. I glanced at the medals. Most of them were strange, but I recognized the scarlet ribbon of the Victoria Cross, with three palms, ornamented with gems. There was something extremely phoney about Chief Captain Winter.

"Come along now, old chap," Winter said sharply. "Kindly cooperate. It will save a great deal of unpleasantness."

I looked at him grimly. "I find being chased, grabbed, gassed, stuffed in a cell, and quizzed about my personal life pretty damned unpleasant already, so don't bother trying to keep it all on a high plane. I'm not answering any questions." I reached in my pocket for my passport; it wasn't there.

"Since you've already stolen my passport, you know by now that I'm an American diplomat,

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and enjoy diplomatic immunity to any form of arrest, detention, interrogation and what have you. So I'm leaving as soon as you return my property, including my shoes."

Winter's face had stiffened up. I could see my act hadn't had much impression on him. He signalled, and two fellows I hadn't seen before moved around into view. They were bigger than he was.

"Mr. Bayard, you must answer my questions; under duress, if necessary. Kindly begin by stating your birthplace."

"You'll find it in my passport," I said. I was looking at the two reinforcements; they were as easy to ignore as a couple of bulldozers in the living room. I decided on a change of tactics. I'd play along in the hope they'd relax a bit, and then make a break for it.

One of the men, at a signal, handed Winter my passport from his desk. He glanced through it, made a number of notes, and passed the booklet back to me.

"Thank you, Mr. Bayard," he said pleasantly. "Now let's get on to particulars. Where did you attend school?"

I tried hard now to give the impression of one eager to please. I regretted my earlier truculence; it made my present pose of coöperativeness a little less plausible. Winter must have been accustomed to the job though, and to subjects who were abject. After a few minutes he waved an arm at the two bouncers, who left the room silently.

Winter had gotten on to the subject of international relations and geopolitics now, and seemed to be fascinated by my commonplace replies. I attempted once or twice to ask why it was necessary to quiz me closely on matters of general information, but was firmly guided back to the answering of questions.

He covered geography and recent history thoroughly with emphasis on the period 1879-1910, and then started in on a biographic list; all I knew about one name after another. Most of them I'd never heard of; a few were minor public figures. He quizzed me in detail on two Italians, Cocini and Maxoni. He could hardly believe I'd never heard of them. He seemed fascinated by many of my replies.

"Niven an *actor?*" he said incredulously? "Never heard of Crane Talbot?" and when I described Churchill's rôle in recent affairs, he laughed uproariously.

After forty minutes of this one-sided discussion, a buzzer sounded faintly, and another of the uniformed men entered, placed a good-sized box on the corner of the desk, and left. Winter ignored the interruption.

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Another twenty minutes of questions went by. Who was the present monarch (of Anglo-Germany, Winters specified); what was the composition of the royal family, the ages of the children, etc., until I had exhausted my knowledge of the subject. What was the status of the Viceroyalty of India; explain the working of the Dominion arrangements of Australia, North America, Cabotsland. . . . I was appalled at the questions; the author of them must have been insane. It was almost impossible to link the garbled references to non-existent political subdivisions and institutions to reality. I answered as matter-of-factly as possible. At least Winter did not seem to be much disturbed by my revision of his distorted version of affairs.

At last Winter rose, moved over to his desk, and mentioned me to a chair beside it. As I pulled the chair out, I glanced into the box on the desk. I saw magazines, folded cloth, coins,—and the butt of a small automatic protruding from under a copy of the World Almanac. Winter had turned away, reaching into a small cabinet behind the desk. My hand darted out, scooped up the pistol, and dropped it into my pocket as I seated myself.

Winter turned back with a blue glass bottle. "Now let's have a drop and I'll attempt to clear up some of your quite justifiable confusion, Mr. Bayard," he said genially. "What would you like to know?" I ignored the bottle.

"Where am I?" I said.

"In the city of Stockholm, Sweden."

"We seem to be moving; what is this, a moving van with an office in it?"

"This is a vehicle, though not a moving van."

"Why did you pick me up?"

"I'm sorry that I can tell you no more than that you were brought in under specific orders from a very high-ranking officer of the Imperial Service." He looked at me speculatively. "This was most unusual," he added.

"I take it kidnapping inoffensive persons is not in itself unusual."

Winter frowned. "You are the subject of an official operation of Imperial Intelligence. Please rest assured you are not being persecuted."

"What is Imperial Intelligence?"

"Mr. Bayard," Winters said earnestly, leaning forward, "it will be necessary for you to face a number of realizations; the first is that the governments which you are accustomed to regarding as supreme sovereign powers must in fact be considered tributary to the Imperium, the Paramount Government in whose service I am an officer."

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"You're a fake," I said.

Winter bristled. "I hold an Imperial Commission as Chief Captain of Intelligence."

"What do you call this vehicle we're in?"

"This is an armed TNL scout based at Stockholm Zero Zero."

"That tells me a lot; what is it, a boat, car, airplane . . .?"

"None of those, Mr. Bayard."

"All right, I'll be specific; what does it travel on, water, air . . .?"

Winter hesitated. "Frankly, I don't know."

I saw it was time to try a new angle of attack. "Where are we going?"

We are presently operating along coordinates zero-zero-zero, zero-zero-six, zero-ninety-two."

"What is our destination? What place?"

"Stockholm Zero Zero, after which you'll probably be transferred to London Zero Zero for further processing."

"What is this Zero business? Do you mean London, England?"

"The London you refer to is London B-I Three."

"What's the difference?"

"London Zero Zero is the capitol of the Imperium, comprising the major portion of the civilized world; North Europe, West Hemisphere, Australia, etc."

I changed the subject. "Why did you kidnap me?"

"A routine interrogational arrest, insofar as I know."

"Do you intend to release me?"

"Yes."

"At home?"

"No."

"Where?"

"I can't say; at one of several concentration points."

"One more question," I said, easing the automatic from my pocket and pointing it at the third medal from the left. "Do you know what this is?"

Winter shrank back in his chair. "Yes," he said. "Where the devil did you get that?"

"Keep your hands in sight; better get up and stand over there."

Winter rose and moved over to the spot indicated. I'd never aimed a pistol at a man point-blank before, but I felt no hesitation now.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

"I've answered every question," Winter said nervously.

"And told me nothing." Winter stood staring at me.

I slipped the safety off with a click. "You have five seconds to start," I said. "One . . . Two . . .

"Very well," Winter said. "No need for all this; I'll try." He hesitated. "You were selected from higher up. We went to a great deal of trouble to get you in particular. As I've explained, that's rather irregular. However," Winter seemed to be warm-

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ing to his subject, "all sampling in this region has been extremely restricted in the past; you see, your continuum occupies an island, one of a very few isolated lines in a vast blighted region. The entire configuration is abnormal, and an extremely dangerous area in which to maneuver. We lost many good men in the early years before we learned how to handle the problems involved."

"I suppose you know this is all nonsense to me." I said. "What do you mean by sampling?"

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Winter said. I took a long brown cigarette from a box on the desk, lit it, and handed it to him. "Sampling refers to the collection of individuals or artifacts from representative B-I lines," he said, blowing out smoke. "We in Intelligence are engaged now in mapping operations. It's fascinating work, old boy, picking up the trend lines, coordinating findings with theoretical work, developing accurate calibrating devices, instruments, et cetera. We're just beginning to discover the potentialities of working the Net. In order to gather the maximum of information in a short time, we've found it expedient to collect individuals for interrogation. In this way we quickly gain a general picture of the configuration of the Net in various 'directions'. In your case, I was directed under sealed orders to enter the Blight, proceed to Blight-Insular Three, and take over custody of Mr. Brion Bayard, a diplomat representing, of all things, an American Republic." Winter spoke enthusiastically now. As he relaxed, he seemed younger.

"It was quite a feather in my cap, old chap, to be selected to conduct an operation in the Blight, and I've found it fascinating. Always in the past, of course, I've operated at such a distance from the Imperium that little or no analogy existed. But B-I Three! Why it's practically the Imperium, with just enough variation to stir the imagination. Close as the two lines are, there's a desert of Blight around and between them that indicates how frightfully close to the rim we've trodden in times past."

"All right, Winter. I've heard enough," I said. "You're just a harmless nut, maybe. But I'll be going now."

"That's quite impossible," Winter said. "We're in the midst of the Blight."

"What's the Blight?" I asked, making conversation as I looked around the room, trying to pick out the best door to leave by. There was three. I decided on the one no one had come through yet. I moved toward it.

"The Blight is a region of ut-

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ter desolation, radiation, chaos," Winter was saying. "There are whole ranges of A-lines where the very planet no longer exists, where automatic cameras have recorded nothing but a vast ring of debris in orbit; then there are the cinder-worlds, and here and there dismal groups of cancerous jungles, alive with radiation-poisoned mutation. It's frightful, old chap. You can wave the pistol at me all night, but it will get you nothing. In a few hours we'll arrive at Zero Zero; you may as well relax till then."

I tried the door; it was locked. "Where's the key?" I said.

"There's no key. It will open automatically at Base."

I went to one of the other doors, the one the man with the box had entered through. I pulled it open and glanced out. The humming sound was louder and down a short and narrow corridor I saw what appeared to be a pilot's compartment. A man's back was visible.

"Come on, Winter," I said. "Go ahead of me."

"Don't be a complete ass, old boy," Winter said, looking irritated. He turned toward his desk. I raised the pistol, sighted, and fired. The shot boomed inside the walls of the room, and Winter leaped back from the desk holding a ripped hand. He whirled on me, for the first time looking really scared. "You're insane," he shouted. "I've told you we're in the midst of the Blight."

I was keeping one eye on the man up front, who was looking over his shoulder while frantically doing something with his other hand.

"You're leaking all over that nice rug," I said. "I'm going to kill you with the next one. Stop this machine."

Winter was pale; he swallowed convulsively. "I swear, Mr. Bayard, that's utterly impossible. I'd rather you'd shoot me. You have no conception of what you're suggesting."

I saw now that I was in the hands of a dangerous lunatic. I believed Winter when he said he'd rather die than stop this bus—or whatever it was. In spite of my threat, I couldn't shoot him in cold blood. I turned and took three steps up the passage and poked the automatic into the small of the back that showed there.

"Cut the switch," I said. The man, who was one of the two who had been standing by when I awoke in the office, continued to twist frantically at a knob on the panel before him. He glanced up at me, but kept on twiddling. I raised the pistol and fired a shot into the instrument panel. The man jumped convulsively, and threw himself forward, protecting the panel with his body.

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"Stop, you bloody fool," he shouted. "Let us explain . . ."

"I tried that," I said. "It didn't work. Get out of my way. I'm bringing this wagon to a halt one way or another."

I stood so that I could see both men. Winter half crouched in the doorway, face white. "Are we all right, Doyle?" he called in a strained voice. Doyle eased away from the panel, turned his back to me, and glanced over the instruments. He flipped a toggle, cursed, and

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turned back to face Winter.

"Communicator dead," he said. "But we're still in operation."

I hesitated now. These two were genuinely terrified of the idea of stopping; they had paid as little attention to me and my noisy gun as one would to a kid with a water pistol. Compared to stopping, a bullet was apparently a trifling irritation.

It was also obvious that this was no moving van. The 'pilots' compartment had more instruments than an airliner, and no windows. Elaborate ideas began to run through my mind. Space ship? Time Machine? What the devil had I gotten into?

"All right, Winter," I said. "Let's call a truce. I'll give you five minutes to give me a satisfactory explanation, prove you're not an escapee from the violent ward, and tell me how you're going to go about setting me down right back where you found me. If you can't or won't coöperate, I'll fill that panel full of holes—including anybody who happens to be standing in front of it."

"Yes," Winter said. "I swear I'll do all I can. Just come away from the control compartment."

"I'll stay right here," I said. "I won't jump the gun unless you give me a reason, like holding your mouth wrong."

Winter was sweating. "This is a scouting machine, operating in the Net. By the Net, I mean the complex of Alternative lines which constitute the matrix of all simultaneous reality. Our drive is the Maxoni-Cocini field generator, which creates a force operating at what one might call a perpendicular to normal entropy. Actually, I know little about the physics of the mechanism; I am not a technician."

I looked at my watch. Winter got the idea. "The Imperium is the government of the Zero Zero A-line in which this discovery was made. The device is an extremely complex one, and there are a thousand ways in which it can cause disaster to its operators if a mistake is made. Judging from the fact that every A-line within thousands of parameters of Zero Zero is a scene of the most fearful carnage, we surmise that our line alone was successful in controlling the force. We conduct our operations in all of that volume of A-space lying outside the Blight, as we term this area of destruction. The Blight itself we ordinarily avoid completely."

Winter wrapped a handkerchief around his bleeding hand as he talked.

"Your line, known as Blight-Insular Three, or B-I Three, is one of two exceptions we know to the general destruction. These two lines lie at some 'distance' from Zero Zero, yours a bit clos-

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er than B-I Two. B-I Three was discovered only a month or so ago, and just recently confirmed as a safe line. All this exploratory work in the Blight was done by drone scouts, unmanned.

"Why I was directed to pick you up, I don't know. But believe me when I say that if you succeed in crippling this scout, you'll precipitate us into identity with an A-line which might be nothing more than a ring of radioactive dust around the sun, or a great mass of mutated fungus. We cannot stop now for any reason until we reach a safe area."

I looked at my watch again. "Four minutes," I said. "Prove what you've been telling me."

Winter licked his lips. "Doyle, get the recon photos of this sector, the ones we made on the way in."

Doyle reached across to a compartment under the panel and brought out a large red envelope. He handed it to me. I passed it to Winter.

"Open it," I said. "Let's see what you've got."

Winter fumbled a moment, then slipped a stack of glossy prints out. He handed me the first one. "All these photos were made from precisely the same spatial and temporal coordinates as those occupied by the scout. The only difference is the Web coordinates."

The print showed an array of ragged fragments of rock hanging against a backdrop of foggy grey, with a few bright points gleaming through. I didn't know what it was intended to represent.

He handed me another; it was similar. So was the third, with the added detail that one rock fragment had a smooth side, with tiny lines across it. Winter spoke up. "The scale is not what it appears; that odd bit is a portion of the earth's crust, about twenty miles from the camera; the lines are roads." I stared, fascinated. Beyond the strangely scribed fragment, other jagged pieces ranged away to the limit of sight, and beyond. My imagination reeled at the idea that perhaps Winter was telling me the literal truth.

Winter passed over another shot. This one showed a lumpy black expanse, visible only by the murky gleam of light reflected by the irregularities in the surface in the direction of the moon, which showed as a brilliant disc in the black sky.

The next was half obscured by a mass which loomed across the lens, too close for focus. Beyond, a huge sprawling bulk, shapeless, gross, immense, lay half buried in tangled vines. I stared horrified at the tiny cow-like head which lolled uselessly on the slope of the mountainous crea-

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ture. Some distance away a distended leg-like appendage projected, the hoof dangling.

"Yes," Winter said. "It's a cow. A mutated cow which no longer has any limitation on its growth. It's a vast tissue culture, absorbing nourishment direct from the vines. They grow all through the mass of flesh. The rudimentary head and occasional limbs are quite useless." I pushed the pictures back at him. I was sick. "I've seen enough," I said. "You've sold me. Let's get out of this." I pushed the pistol into my pocket. I thought of the bullet hole in the panel and shuddered.

—

Back in the office, I sat down at the desk. Winter took the chair. If he had any gimmicks wired up he couldn't reach them from there. He examined his hand distastefully and tightened the handkerchief. I didn't offer to help. He offered me the blue flask again. This time I took a healthy belt from it.

Winter spoke up again. "It's a very unnerving thing, old chap, to have it shown to you all at once that way, I know. I was actually trying to ease the shock, but you must admit you were insistent."

"I can still shoot the pair of you, and anybody else you've got aboard, if it looks like it will help," I said. "I don't like being shanghaied. I don't know what your bosses have in store for me, but I'll bet I won't like it. So what are you going to do about it?"

"I have to bring you in, or give my life in the attempt," Winter said calmly. "I am an Imperial Officer. Inasmuch as you now realize that you can't leave the vessel until we are clear of the Blight, and in view of the fact that in a few hours automatic controls will bring us into phase on the operations ramp at Stockholm Zero Zero, where an escort will be awaiting your arrival, I can't see what advantage you'd derive from killing me. Therefore, we may as well relax and accept the situation." He smiled pleasantly.

I thought about it. I understood on an intellectual level the general idea of what Winter had been telling me, without even beginning to be able to conceive of it as actual physical fact. I thought about it while Winter went on talking, explaining.

I tried to assemble his fragmentary information into a coherent picture: a vast spider web of lines, each one a complete universe, each minutely different from all the others; somewhere, a line, or world, in which a device had been developed that enabled a man to move across the lines. Well, why not, I thought. With all those lines to work with,

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everything was bound to happen in one of them; or was it?

"How about all the other A-lines, Winter," I said at the thought, "where this same discovery must have been made, where there was only some unimportant difference. Why aren't you swarming all over each other, bumping into yourself?"

"That's been a big question to our scientists, old chap, and they haven't yet come up with any definitive answers. However, there are a few established points. First, the thing is a fantastically delicate device, as I've explained. The tiniest slip in the initial experimentation, and we'd have ended like some of those other lines you've seen photos of. Apparently the odds were quite fantastically against our escaping the consequences of the discovery; still, we did, and now we know how to control it.

"As to the very close lines, theory now seems to indicate that there is no actual physical separation between lines; those microscopically close to one another actually merge, blend . . . it's difficult to explain. One actually wanders from one to another, at random, you know. In fact, such is the curious nature of infinity, that there seem to be an infinite number of infinitely close lines we're constantly shifting about in. Usually this makes no difference; we don't notice it, any more than we're aware of hopping along from one temporal point to the next as normal entropy progresses."

At my puzzled frown he added, "The lines run both ways, you know; in an infinite number of directions. If we could run straight back along the normal E-line, we'd be travelling into the past. This won't work, for practical reasons involving two bodies occupying the same space, and all that sort of thing. The Maxoni principle enables us to move in a manner which we think of as being at right angles to the normal drift. With it, we can operate through 360 degrees, but always at the same E-level at which we start. Thus, we will arrive at Stockholm Zero-Zero at the same moment we departed from B-I Three." Winter laughed. "This detail caused no end of misunderstanding and counter-accusation on the first trials."

"So we're all shifting from one universe to another all the time without knowing it," I said skeptically.

"Not necessarily all of us, not all the time," Winter said. "But emotional stress seems to have the effect of displacing one; of course with the relative positions of two grains of sand, or even of two atoms within a grain of sand being the only difference between two adjacent lines, you'd

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not be likely to notice; but at times greater slips occur with most individuals. Perhaps you yourself have noticed some tiny discrepancy at one time or another; some article apparently moved or lost; some sudden change in the character of someone you know; false recollections of past events. The universe isn't all as rigid as one might like to believe."

"You're being awfully plausible, Winter," I said. "Let's pretend I accept your story. Now tell me about this vehicle."

"Just a small mobile M C station, mounted on an autopropelled chassis. It can move about on level ground or paved areas, and also in calm water. It enables us to do most of our spatial maneuvering on our own ground, so to speak, and avoid exposing ourselves to the hazards of attempting to conduct ground operations in strange areas."

"Where are the rest of the men in your party," I asked. "There are at least three more of you."

"They're all at their assigned posts," Winter said. "There's another small room containing the drive mechanism forward of the control compartment."

"If the controls are set for an automatic return to your base, why do you need all the technicians on the job?" I asked.

Winter stared. "You don't appreciate the complexity and delicacy of controlling this unit," he said. "Constant attention is required."

"What's this stuff for?" I indicated the box on the desk from which I'd gotten the gun.

Winter looked at it, then said ruefully, "So that's where you acquired the weapon. I knew you'd been searched. Damned careless of Doyle; bloody souvenir hunter! I told him to submit everything to me for approval before we returned, so I guess it's my fault." He touched his aching hand tenderly.

"Don't feel too bad about it; I'm just a clever guy," I said. "However, I'm not very brave. As a matter of fact I'm scared to death of what's in store for me when we arrive at our destination."

"You'll be well treated, Mr. Bayard," Winter assured me. I let that one pass. Maybe when we arrived, I could come out shooting, make an escape. . . . That line of thought didn't seem very encouraging either. What would I do next, loose in this Imperium of Winter's? What I needed was a return ticket home. I found myself thinking of it as B-I Three, and realized I was beginning to accept Winter's story. I took another drink from the blue bottle.

Except for the hum, it was

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quiet in the room. The old man up front stayed hunched over his instruments. Winter shifted in his chair, cleared his throat, and said nothing. There was an odd sensation of motion, in spite of the fact that the room was steady.

"Why don't we explode when we pass through one of those empty-space lines, or burn in the hot ones," I asked suddenly. "Suppose we found ourselves peeking out from inside one of those hunks of rock you were photographing?"

"We don't linger about long enough, old boy," Winter said. "We remain in any one line for no finite length of time, therefore there's no time for us to react physically to our surroundings."

"How can you take pictures, and use communicators?"

"The camera remains inside the field. The photo is actually a composite exposure of all the lines we cross during the instant of the exposure. The lines differ hardly at all, of course, and the prints are quite clear. Light, of course, is a condition, not an event. Our communicators employ a sort of grating which spreads the transmission."

"I don't get it," I said. I was feeling confused, but a little more at ease. The blue bottle was all right. I had another sample.

"I'm making a special study of what I term 'A-entropy'," Winter said. "I've taken several rather fascinating sequences using a cine-camera, which seem to indicate that there are other 'streams of consciousness' than those with which we're familiar, those we sense as our own personalities. If one focuses a camera on an individual subject, the progressive changes in the subject, all of course occurring at the same instant of normal time, seem to be almost as purposeful as our progressive spatial changes as we proceed along an E-line." Winter warmed to his subject, ignoring my lack of response.

"Now consider a normal cine sequence. Each frame shows the subject in a slightly different position, spatially and temporally. As we proceed along from one frame to the next, we see the action develop. The man walks, the wave breaks, the horse gallops, etc. Well, the same sort of thing can be seen in my films. I've one fascinating sequence. Here, let me show you," he said.

I leaned forward with the gun in my hand and watched Winter intently as he rose and pulled a small projector from a wall cabinet. He placed it on a table, made a few adjustments, and a scene flashed clearly on the white wall opposite me. A man stood alone in a field.

Winter continued with his running commentary.

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"We were progressing directly away from Base; notice the increasing alienness of the scene. . . ."

The man changed, the scene behind him changed, drifting and oddly flowing, though he stood unmoving. The sun was visible in the sky. A leaf falling through the air hung, suspended. The man held a hoe, with which he was in the act of rooting out a small green weed. On the screen, the weed grew visibly, putting out leaves. The leaves grew larger, became splotched with red. The man seemed to shrink back, without moving his feet. The hoe shortened, the metal twisting and writhing into a new shape. The man's arms grew shorter, thicker, his back more stooped.

All around, the other plants drew back, apparently drifting through the soil, some fading down to nothing, others gathering together into gnarled clumps. The weed burgeoned enormously. Fleshy leaves waved out toward the man, now hardly a man. Horny armor spread like a carapace across his shoulders, and great clamp-like hands gripped a glittering scythe. Now teeth were appearing along the edge of each leaf, as the scythe merged with their fat stems. The roots of the plant twisted into view above the ground, entoiling the legs of the no longer human creature attacking it. He too gained height now, the head enlarging to accommodate great jaws.

All around, the field lay barren, the remaining plants grouped in tight impregnable mounds here and there. The figure of the monstrous animal now reared high above the plant, locked in its leafy embrace. The scythe, buried among the stems, twisted, and tendrils withered and leaves wilted back to shrivelled brown husks as new shoots appeared, raw and pink. Plant teeth grated on flaring armor. It was a grim and silent battle, waged without movement under a changeless sky.

Now the plant shrank back, blackening, drooping. The sharp steel blade was visible once more; the armor plates melted gradually back into the shoulders, as the victorious creature gave up his monstrous defensive form. The great jaws dwindled, the hands and legs changed. In the distance, the mounds opened and plants flowed out across the soil. Another minute and the man, or almost a man if you overlooked the green skin and short horns, stood with upraised hoe before a small crimson weed.

The projector blinked off.

"What did you think of that, old chap" Winter said.

"A nightmare", I said.

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"There's a sequence of cause and effect, of attack and defense, in a completely different fashion from anything we know of course, but quite obvious, I think."

"I think I'd better lay off that little old blue bottle," I said. But I didn't feel as flippant as I sounded. I was shaken all the way through, and for the first time I really believed in what was happening.

"The last of that sequence was made at a tremendous distance from Zero Zero," Winter said. "The frames were actually shot at a rate of one per second of subjective time. No way of telling, of course, just what the normal rate of progression, if any, might be, along that line; what appeared to us to be a brief battle might have been a life-long struggle, or even an age of evolution. The most remote lines we saw, there at the end, represent a divergence point nearly a-million years in the past."

"Winter," I said, "this is all extremely interesting, but I'd enjoy it a lot more if I had some idea of what you people have in mind for me. I get the impression that you have small regard for a man's comfort. I think you might be planning to use me in some sort of colorful experiment, and then throw me away; toss me out into one of those cosmic junk-heaps you showed me. And that stuff in the blue bottle isn't quite soothing enough to drive the idea out of my mind."

"Great heavens, old boy!" Winter sat bolt upright. "Nothing of that sort, I can assure you. Why, we're not blasted barbarians! Since you are an object of official interest of the Imperium, you can be assured of humane and honorable treatment."

"I didn't like what you said about 'concentration points' a while back. That sounds like jail to me."

"Not at all," Winter expostulated. "There are a vast number of very pleasant A-lines well outside the Blight which are either completely uninhabited, or are occupied by backward or underdeveloped peoples. One can well nigh select the technological and cultural level in which one would like to live. All interrogation subjects are most scrupulously provided for; they're supplied with everything necessary to live in comfort for the remainder of their normal lives."

"Marooned on a desert island, or parked in a native village? That doesn't sound too jolly to me," I said. "I'd rather be at home."

Winter smiled speculatively. "What would you say to being set up with a fortune in gold, and placed in a society closely resembling that of, say, England in the 17th Century; with the

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added advantage that you'd have electricity, plenty of modern literature, supplies for a lifetime, whatever you wish. You must remember that we have the resources of all the universe to draw upon."

"I'd like it better if I had a little more choice," I said. It was all very cozy here in this room at the moment, but I was still the victim of a rather crude kidnapping, and I couldn't think of anything practical I could do about it at the moment.

"Suppose we keep right on going, once we're clear of the Blight," I said. "That reception committee wouldn't be waiting then. You could run this buggy back to B-I Three. I could force you."

"See here, Bayard," Winter said impatiently. "You have a gun; very well, shoot me; shoot all of us. What would that gain you? The operation of this machine requires a very high technical skill. The controls are set for automatic return to the starting point. It is absolutely against Imperium policy to return a subject to the line from which he was taken. The only thing for you to do is cooperate with us, and you have my assurance as an Imperial officer that you will be treated honorably."

I looked at the gun. "According to the movies," I said, "the fellow with the rod always gets his own way. But you don't seem to care whether I shoot you or not."

Winter smiled. "Aside from the fact that you've had quite a few draughts from my brandy flask and probably couldn't hit the wall with that weapon you're holding, I assure you—"

"You're always assuring me," I said. I tossed the pistol onto the desk. I put my feet up on the polished top, and leaned back in the chair. "Wake me up when we get there. I'll want to fix my face."

Winter laughed. "Now you're being reasonable, old boy. It would be damned embarrassing for me to have to warn the personnel at base that you were waving a pistol about."

III

I WOKE up with a start. My neck ached abominably; so did the rest of me, as soon as I moved. I groaned, dragged my feet down off the desk, and sat up. There was something wrong. Winter was gone; and the humming had stopped. I jumped up.

"Winter," I shouted. I had a vivid picture of myself marooned in one of those hell-worlds. At that moment I realized I wasn't half as afraid of arriving at Zero Zero as I was of not getting there.

Winter pushed the door open

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and glanced in. "I'll be with you in a moment, Mr. Bayard," he said. "We've arrived on schedule."

I was nervous. The gun was gone. I walked up and down the room thinking. I wondered where my briefcase was, but it seemed less important now. I was into something bigger. I told myself it was no worse than going to one of the Ambassador's receptions. I would try to take it lightly; there wasn't any doubt that I'd have to take it. My best bet was to walk in as though I'd thought of it myself.

The two bouncers came in, followed by Winter. They all had their uniform caps on now, and were acting very formal. Winter turned to face the others, and they both threw him a British salute, only more so. He returned it with a casual wave, and turned to me as they stepped to the side door.

"Shall we disembark, Mr. Bayard?" he said. One of the two men pushed the door open, and stood at attention beside it. Beyond the opening I could see muted sunshine on a level paved surface, and a group of men in white uniforms, looking in our direction.

Winter was waiting, I might as well take the plunge, I thought. I stepped down through the door and looked around. We were in a large shed, looking something like a railroad station. One of the men in the waiting group turned to another, eyes on me, and said something. The other nodded. They stepped forward.

Winter spoke up from beside me. "Gentlemen' Mr. Brion Bayard."

They looked at me and I looked back. They all wore tight white uniforms, lots of medals, and elaborate brass on their shoulders.

"By jove, Winter," one of them said. "You've brought it off. Congratulations, old man." They gathered around Winter, asking questions, turning to stare at me. None of them said anything to me. I tried to catch Winter's eye. He was standing with one arm behind him, looking smug and modest.

To hell with them, I thought. I turned and started strolling toward the front of the shed. There was one door with a sentry box arrangement beside it. I gave the man on duty a cool glance and started past.

"'ere, Sir, may I see your i-den-ti-fi-cation," the sentry said as I walked by him.

I turned. I was in a careless mood. "You'd better memorize this face," I said cooly. "You'll be seeing a great deal of it from now on. I'm your new commander." I looked him up and down.

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"Your uniform is in need of attention." I turned and went on. Behind me the sentry was saying, "'Ere, I say." I ignored him.

Winter appeared at that point, putting an end to what would have been a very neat escape, I thought. But where the hell would I go?

"Here, old man," he said. "Don't go wandering about. I'm to take you direct to Royal Intelligence, where you'll doubtless find out a bit more about the reasons for your, ah," Winter cleared his throat, "visit."

"I thought it was Imperial Intelligence", I said. "And for the high-level operation this is supposed to be, this is a remarkably modest reception. I thought there would be a band, or at least a couple of cops with handcuffs."

"Royal Swedish Intelligence," Winter explained briskly. "Sweden being tributary to the Emperor, of course; Imperial Intelligence chaps will be on hand. As for your reception, we don't believe in making much of a fuss, you know." Winter waved me into a boxy black staff car which waited at the curb. It swung out at once into light traffic which pulled out of our way as we opened up down the center of the broad avenue.

"I thought your scout just travelled cross-ways," I said, "and stayed in the same spot on the map. This doesn't look like the hilly area of the Old Town."

"You have a suspicious mind and an eye for detail," Winter said. "We maneuvered the scout through the streets to the position of the ramps before going into Drive. We're on the north side of the city now."

"Who am I going to meet?" I asked. "And will they talk to me, or just talk past my head like that last bunch?"

"You mustn't mind those chaps," Winter said. "They've seen these missions returning a thousand times, and I suppose they've become a bit blasé. They were actually impressed."

Our giant car roared across a bridge, and swirled into a long gravelled drive leading to a wrought-iron gate before a massive grey granite building. The people I saw looked perfectly ordinary, with the exception of a few oddities of dress and an unusually large number of gaudy uniforms. The guard at the iron gate was wearing a cherry-colored tunic, white trousers, and a black steel helmet surmounted by a gold spike and a deep purple plume. He presented arms, (a short and wicked looking nickleplated machine gun), and as the gate swung wide we eased past him and stopped before broad doors of polished iron-bound oak. A brass plate beside the entrance said KUNGLIGA SVENSKA SPIONAGE.

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I said nothing as we walked down a spotless white marble-floored hall, entered a spacious elevator, and rode up to the top floor. We walked along another hall, this one paved with red granite, and paused before a large door at the end. There was no one else around.

"Just be relaxed, Mr. Bayard, answer all questions fully, and use the same forms of address as I."

"I'll try not to fall down," I said. Winter looked as nervous as I felt as he opened the door after a polite tap.

The room was an office, large and handsomely furnished. Across a wide expanse of grey rug three men sat around a broad desk, behind which sat a fourth. Winter closed the door, walked across the room with me trailing behind him, and came to a rigid position of attention ten feet from the desk. His arm swung up in a real elbow-buster of a salute, and held it.

"Sir, Chief Captain Winter reports as ordered," He said in a strained voice.

"Very good, Winter," said the man behind the desk, sketching a salute casually. Winter brought his arm down with a snap. He rotated rigidly toward the others.

"*Kaiserliche Hochheit,*" he said, bowing stiffly from the waist at one of the seated figures. "Chief Inspector," he greeted the second, while the third, a rather paunchy fellow with a jolly expression and a somehow familiar face rated just "sir."

"'*Hochwelgeboren*' will do," murmured the lean aristocratic-looking one whom Winter had addressed first. Apparently instead of an 'imperial highness' he was only a 'high-well-born'. Winter turned bright pink. "I beg Your Excellency's pardon," he said in a choked voice. The round-faced man grinned broadly.

The man behind the desk had been studying me intently during this exchange. "Please be seated, Mr. Bayard," he said pleasantly, indicating an empty chair directly in front of the desk. Winter was still standing ridigly. The man glanced at him. "Stand at ease, Chief Captain," he said in a dry tone, turning back to me.

"I hope that your being brought here has not prejudiced you against us unduly, Mr. Bayard," he said. He had a long gaunt face with a heavy jaw. From pictures I had seen of King Gustav of Sweden, I suspected he was a relative. He confirmed my guess.

"I am General Bernadotte," he said. "These gentlemen are the Friherr von Richthofen, Chief Inspector Bale, and Mr. Goering." I nodded at them. Bale was

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a thin broadshouldered man with a small bald head. He wore an expression of disapproval.

Bernadotte went on. "I would like first to assure you that our decision to bring you here was not made lightly. I know that you have many questions, and all will be answered fully. For the present, I shall tell you frankly that we have called you here to ask for your help."

I hadn't been prepared for this. I don't know what I expected, but to have this panel of high-powered brass asking for my puny assistance left me opening and closing my mouth without managing to say anything.

"It's remarkable," commented the paunchy civilian. I looked at him. Winter had called him Mr. Goering. I thought of pictures of Hitler's gross Air chief.

"Not *Hermann* Goering?" I said.

The fat man looked surprised, and a smile spread across his face.

"Yes, my name is Hermann," he said. "How did you know this?" He had a fairly heavy German accent.

I found it hard to explain. This was something I hadn't thought of; actual doubles, or analogs of figures in my own world. Now I knew beyond a doubt that Winter had not been lying to me. "Back where I came from, everyone knows your name," I said. "Reichmarshall Goering. . . ."

"Reichmarshall!" Goering repeated. "What an intriguing title!" He looked around at the others. "Is this not a most interesting and magnificent information?" He beamed. "I, poor fat Hermann, a Reichsmarshall, and known to all." He was delighted.

"I am certain," the general said, "that Mr. Bayard will have many extremely interesting things to tell us. I think we owe it to him to give a full explanation first."

"Thank you, General," I said. "I'd appreciate that."

"How much have you been told of the nature of our governmental structure, Mr. Bayard, and of our operations in the Net?"

"I think I have a fair grasp of the general concept," I said, "and I understand that your Imperial government claims sovereignty over all other governments. That's about all."

"Insofar as we know at present, only this government, with perhaps one exception which I'll mention in a moment, has the technique of Net operation. We therefore exercise a natural influence of wider scope than other governing bodies. This is not to imply that the Imperium seeks to interfere with or to exploit others. Our relations with all lines are based on honorable trea-

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ties, negotiated as soon after contact as practicable. In the case of the Blight Insular lines, there are of course difficulties. . . ."

Bernadotte hesitated, then added, "The Imperium limits its exercise of sovereignty; it is invoked as an ultimate resort, in case of anti-civil activity."

"Multi-phased reality is of course rather a shocking thing to encounter suddenly," the General went on, "after a lifetime of living in one's own narrow world. To those of us who have grown up with it, it seems only natural, in keeping with the principles of multiplicity and the continuum. The idea of a monolinear causal sequence is seen to be an artificially restrictive conception, an oversimplification of reality growing out of human egotism."

The other three men listened as attentively as I. It was very quiet, with only the occasional faint sounds of traffic from the street below.

"Insofar as we have been able to determine thus far from our studies of the B-I three line, from which you come, our two lines share a common history up to about the year 1790. They remain parallel in many ways for about another century; thereafter they diverge rather sharply.

Here in our world, two Italian scientists, Giulio Maxoni and Carlo Cocini, in the year 1893, made a basic discovery, which, after several years of study, they embodied in a device which enabled them to move about at will through a wide range of what we now term Alternate lines, or A-lines.

"Cocini lost his life in an early exploratory test, and Maxoni determined to offer the machine to the Italian government. He was rudely rebuffed.

"After several years of harassment by the Italian press, which ridiculed him unmercifully, Maxoni went to England, and offered his invention to the British government. There was a long and very cautious period of negotiation, but eventually a bargain was struck. Maxoni received a title, estates, and one million pounds in gold. He died a year later.

"The British government now had sole control of the most important basic human discovery since the wheel. The wheel gave man the power to move easily across the surface of his world; the Maxoni principle gave him all the worlds to move about in."

Leather creaked faintly as I moved in my chair. The general leaned back and drew a deep breath. He smiled.

"I hope that I am not overwhelming you with an excess of historical detail, Mr. Bayard."

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"Not at all," I replied. "I'm very much interested."

He went on. "At that time the British Government was negotiating with the Imperial Germanic government in an effort to establish workable trade agreements, and avoid a fratricidal war, which then appeared to be an inevitable eventually if appropriate spheres of influence were not agreed upon.

"The acquisition of the Maxoni papers placed a different complexion on the situation. Rightfully feeling that they now had a considerably more favorable position from which to negotiate, the British suggested an amalgamation of the two empires into the present Anglo-Germanic Imperium, with the House of Hanover-Windsor occupying the Imperial throne. Sweden signed the Concord shortly thereafter, and after resolution of a number of differences in detail, the Imperium came into being on January 1, 1900."

I had the feeling the general was over-simplifying things. I wondered how many people had been killed in the process of resolving the minor details. I kept the thought to myself.

"Since its inception," the general continued, "the Imperium has conducted a program of exploration, charting, and study of the A-continuum. It was quickly determined that for a vast distance on all sides of the Home line, utter desolation existed; outside that blighted region, however, were the infinite resources of countless lines. Those lines lying just outside the Blight seem uniformly to represent a divergence point at about four hundred years in the past; that is to say, our common histories differentiate about the year 1550. As one travels farther out, the divergence date recedes. At the limits of our explorations to date, the C. H. date is about 1,000,000 B. C."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. This seemed to be all right with Bernadotte.

"Then, in 1947, examination of photos made by automatic camera scouts revealed an anomaly; an apparently normal, inhabited world, lying well within the Blight. It took weeks of careful searching to pin-point the line. For the first time, we were visiting a world closely analagous to our own, in which many of the institutions of our own world should be duplicated.

"We had hopes of a fruitful liaison between the two worlds, but in this we were bitterly disappointed."

The general turned to the bald man whom he had introduced as Chief Inspector Bale.

"Chief Inspector," he said,

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"will you take up the account at his point?"

Bale sat up in his chair, folded his hands, and began.

"In September, 1948, two senior agents of Imperial Intelligence were dispatched with temporary rank of Career Minister and full diplomatic accreditization, to negotiate an agreement with the leaders of the National People's State. This political unit actually embraces most of the habitable world of the B-I Two line. A series of frightful wars, employing some sort of radioactive explosives, had destroyed the better part of civilization. Europe was a shambles. We found that the NPS headquarters was in North Africa, and had as its nucleus the former French colonial government there. The top man was a ruthless ex-soldier who had established himself as uncontested dictator of what remained of things. His army was made up of units of all the previous combatants, held together by the promise of free looting and top position in a new society based on raw force."

Bale spoke calmly, but with obvious distaste. "There was no semblance whatever of respect for institutions, position, common decency. The fighting man owned everything, subject only to the Dictator's prior claim; women were property to be used as slaves and concubines, and bought and sold freely. No one else counted. And at the top, living off the fat of the land, the Dictator.

"Our agents approached a military sub-chief, calling himself Colonel-General Yang in charge of a rag-tag mob of ruffians in motley uniforms, and asked to be conducted to the headquarters of the Dictator. Yang had them clapped into a cell and beaten insensible, in spite of their presentation of diplomatic passports and identity cards.

"He did however send them along to the Dictator, who gave them an interview. During the talk, the fellow drew a pistol and shot one of my two chaps through the head, killing him instantly. When this failed to make the other volunteer anything further than that he was an accredited envoy of the Imperial government requesting an exequatur and appropriate treatment, prior to negotiating an international agreement, he was turned over to experienced torturers.

Under torture, the agent gave out just enough to convince his interrogators that he was insane; he was released to starve or die of wounds. We managed to spot him and pick him up in time to get the story before he died."

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I still had no comment to make. It didn't sound pretty, but then I wasn't too enthusiastic about the methods employed by the Imperium either. The general resumed the story.

"We resolved to make no attempt at punitive action, but simply to leave this unfortunate line in isolation.

"About a year ago, an event occurred which rendered this policy no longer tenable." The general turned to the lean faced man.

"Manfred, I will ask you to cover this portion of the briefing."

"Units of our Net Surveillance Service detected activity at a point some distance within the area called Sector 92," Richthofen began. "This was a contingency against which we had been on guard from the first. It was, however, only the second time within the almost 60 years of constant alertness that unauthorized activation of an M-C field had been observed. On the first occasion, nearly fifty years ago, a minor conspiracy among disgruntled officials was responsible, and no harm was done.

"This time it was not so simple. A heavily armed M-C unit of unknown origin had dropped into identity with one of our most prized industrial lines, one of a group with which we conduct a multi-billion-pound trade. The intruder materialized in a population center, and released virulent poisonous gasses, killing hundreds. Masked troops then emerged, only a platoon or two of them, and proceeded to strip bodies, loot shops. . . . An orgy of wanton destruction. Our NSS scout arrived some hours after the attackers had departed. The scout was subjected to a heavy attack in its turn by the justifiably aroused inhabitants of the area before it was able to properly identify itself as an Imperium vessel."

Richthofen had a disdainful frown on his face. "I personally conducted the rescue and salvage operation; over four hundred innocent civilians dead, valuable manufacturing facilities destroyed by fire, production lines disrupted, the population entirely demoralized. A bitter spectacle for us."

"You see, Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said, "We are well nigh helpless to protect our friends against such forays. Although we have developed extremely effective M-C field detection devices, the difficulty of reaching the scene of an attack in time is practically insurmountable. The actual transit takes no time, but locating the precise line among numberless others is an extremely delicate operation. Our homing devices make it possible, but

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only after we have made a very close approximation manually."

"In quick succession thereafter," Richthofen continued, "we suffered seven similar raids. Then the pattern changed. The raiders began appearing in numbers, with large cargo carrying units. They also set about rounding up all the young women at each raid, and taking them along into captivity. It became obvious that a major threat to the Imperium had come into existence.

"At last we had the good fortune to detect a raider's field in the close vicinity of one of our armed scouts. It quickly dropped in on a converging course, and located the pirate about twenty minutes after it had launched its attack. The commander of the scout quite properly opened up at once with high explosive cannon and blew the enemy to rubble. Its crew, demoralized by the loss of their vessel, nevertheless resisted capture almost to the last man. We were able to secure only two prisoners for interrogation."

I wondered how the Imperium's methods of interrogation compared with those of the dictator of B-I Two, but I didn't ask. I might find out soon enough.

"We learned a great deal more than we expected from our prisoners. They were talkative and boastful types. The raiding parties depend for their effectiveness on striking unexpectedly and departing quickly. The number of pirate vessels we placed at no more than four, each manned by about fifty men. They boasted of a great weapon which was held in reserve, and which would undoubtedly be used to avenge them. It was apparent from the remarks of the prisoners that they had not had the M-C drive long, and that they knew nothing of the configuration of the Net, or of the endless ramifications of simultaneous reality. They seemed to think their fellows would find our base and destroy it with ease. They also had only a vague idea of the extent and nature of the Blight. They mentioned that several of their ships had disappeared, doubtless into that region. It appears also, happily for us, that they have only the most elementary detection devices and that their controls are erratic in the extreme. But the information of real importance we learned was the identity of the raiders."

Richthofen paused for dramatic effect. "It was our unhappy sister world, B-I Two."

"Somehow," Bernadotte took up the story, "in spite of their condition of chaotic social disorder and their destructive wars, they had succeeded in harness-

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ing the M-C principle. Their apparatus is even more primitive than that with which we began almost sixty years ago, yet they have escaped disaster.

"The next move came with startling suddenness. Whether by virtue of an astonishingly rapid scientific development, or by sheer persistence and blind luck, one of their scouts succeeded last month in locating the Zero Zero line of the Imperium itself. The vessel dropped into identity with our continuum on the outskirts of the city of Berlin, one of the royal capitals. The crew had apparently been prepared for their visit. They planted a strange device atop a flimsy tower in a field, and embarked instantly. Within a matter of three minutes, as well as we have been able to determine, the device detonated with unbelievable force. Over a square mile was absolutely desolated; casualties ran into the thousands. And the entire area still remains poisoned with some form of radiation-producing debris which renders the region uninhabitable."

I nodded. "I think I understand," I said.

"Yes," the general said, "you have something of this sort in your B-I Three world also, do you not?"

I assumed the question was rhetorical and said nothing.

Bernadotte continued. "Crude though their methods are, they have succeeded already in flaunting the Imperium. It is only a matter of time, we feel, before they develop adequate controls and detection devices. We will then be faced with the prospect of hordes of ragged but efficient soldiers, armed with the frightful radium bombs with which they destroyed their own culture, descending on the mother world of the Imperium.

"This eventuality is one for which it has been necessary to make preparation. There seemed to be two possibilities, both equally undesirable. We could await further attack, meanwhile readying our defenses, of doubtful value against the fantastic explosives of the enemy; or we could ourselves mount an offensive, launching a massive invasion force against B-I Two. The logistics problems involved in either plan would be unbelievably complex."

I was learning a few things about the Imperium. In the first place, they did not have the Atomic bomb, and had no conception of its power. To consider war against an organized military force armed with atomics was proof of that. Also, not having had the harsh lessons of two major wars to assist them, they were naive, almost backward, in some ways. They thought more like Europeans of

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the 19th Century than modern westerners.

"About one month ago, Mr. Bayard," the general continued, "a new factor was introduced, giving us a third possibility. In the heart of the Blight, at only a very little distance from B-I Two, and even closer to us than it, we found a second surviving line. That line was of course your home world, designated Blight-Insular Three by us."

Bernadotte nodded at Bale, who took up the account:

"Within 72 hours 150 special agents of Imperial Intelligence, and selected men from the British, Swedish and German Royal Intelligence services had been placed at carefully scouted positions in B-I Three. Our first preliminary survey, which was carried out under Imminent Calamity priority, had given us the rough picture in less than six hours. We found we were dealing with a line having the same type radium bomb as B-I Two, but which had succeeded in averting general destructive war. We had the broad outlines of the past hundred years' developments, and the approximate present political situation. Our men were stationed at points of maximum activity, and spread thin though they were, they immediately began filling in the outline.

"It was important that we not make the same mistake which we had in B-I Two, of beginning contact on the basis of false assumptions as to the conduct one might expect from civilized men. We had an opportunity with the new B-I Three line to establish a close surveillance point from which to carry on scouting operations aimed at giving us a cleaner picture of B-I Two. There was also the possibility of enlisting an ally against B-I Two, but only of course in the event the new line had or was about to achieve the M-C field. Unfortunately, the latter was not the case. Still, we felt there must be some way in which we could turn this find to good advantage."

Bale paused and looked at me sharply. "If this seems overly opportunistic or cynical to you, Mr. Bayard, please recall that we were fighting for our existence. And still are," he added.

I had a distinct feeling that Bale didn't like me. All of them were treating me pretty strangely, I thought, in some subtle way. It was almost as if they were afraid of me.

Winter was still standing, in a rather awkward parade rest position. I got the impression most of this was news to him, too.

"We were determined to make no blunders with regard to B-I Three," Bale continued. "Too much was at stake. As the information flowed in from our men,

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all of whom, being our top agents, had succeeded in establishing their cover identities without difficulty, it was immediately passed to the General Staff and to the Imperial Emergency Cabinet for study. The two bodies remained in constant session for over a week without developing any adequate scheme for handling the new factor.

"One committee of the Emergency Cabinet was assigned the important task of determining as closely as possible the precise C. H. relationship of B-I Three with both B-I Two and the Imperium. This is an extremely tricky chore, as it is quite possible for an amazing parallelism to exist in one phase of an A-line while the most fantastic variants crop up in another.

"One week ago today the committee reported findings they considered to be 98% reliable. Your B-I Three line shared the history of the B-I Two until the date 1911, probably early in the year. At that point, my colleague, Mr. Goering, of German Intelligence, who had been sitting in on the meeting, made a brilliant contribution. His suggestion was immediately adopted. All agents were alerted at once to drop all other lines of inquiry and concentrate on picking up a trace of—" Bale looked at me. "Mr. Brion Bayard."

They knew I was on the verge of exploding from pure curiosity, so I just sat and looked back at Bale. He pursed his lips. He sure as hell didn't like me.

"We picked you up from records at your University, ah," Bale frowned at me. "Something like aluminum alloy. . . . " Bale must be an Oxford man, I thought.

"Illinois," I said.

"Oh yes, that's it," Bale said.

I looked at him without expression.

"At any rate," Bale went on, "it was a relatively simple matter to follow you up then through your military service and into your Diplomatic Service. Our man just missed you at your Legation at Viat-Kai . . ."

"Consulate General," I corrected.

It annoyed Bale. I was glad; I didn't like him much either.

"You had left the post the preceding day and were proceeding to your headquarters via Stockholm. We had a man on the spot; he kept tabs on you until the shuttle could arrive. The rest you know."

There was a lengthening silence. I shifted in my chair, looking from one expressionless face to another.

"All right," I said. "It seems I'm supposed to ask, so I'll oblige, just to speed things along. Why me?"

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Almost hesitantly General Bernadotte opened a drawer of the desk and drew out a flat object wrapped in brown paper. He removed the paper very deliberately as he spoke.

"I have here an official portrait of the Dictator of the world of Blight-Insular Two," he said. "One of the few artifacts we have been able to bring along from that unhappy region. Copies of this picture are posted everywhere there."

He passed it over to me. It was a crude lithograph, in color, showing a man in uniform, the chest as far down as the picture extended covered with medals. Beneath the portrait was the legend: "HIS MARTIAL EXCELLENCY, DUKE OF ALGIERS, WARLORD OF THE COMBINED FORCES, MARSHALL GENERAL OF THE STATE, BRION THE FIRST BAYARD, DICTATOR."

The picture was of me.

IV

I stared at the garish portrait for a long time. It wasn't registering; I had a feeling of disorientation. There was too much to absorb.

"Now you will understand, Mr. Bayard, why we have brought you here," the general said, as I silently handed the picture back to him. "You represent our hidden ace. But only if you consent to help us of your own free will." He turned to Richthofen again.

"Manfred, will you outline our plan to Mr. Bayard?"

Richthofen cleared his throat. "Quite possibly," he said, "we could succeed in disposing of the Dictator Bayard by bombing his headquarters. This, however, would merely create a temporary diversion until a new leader emerged. The organization of the enemy seems to be such that no more than a very brief respite would be gained, if any at all, before the attacks would be resumed; and we are not prepared to sustain such onslaughts as these.

"No, it is far better for our purpose that Bayard remain the leader of the National People's State—and that we control him." Here he looked intently at me.

"A specially equipped TNL scout, operated by our best pilot-technician could plant a man within the private apartment which occupies the top floor of the Dictator's palace at Algiers. We believe that a resolute man introduced into the palace in this manner, armed with the most effective hand weapons at our disposal, could succeed in locating and entering the dictator's sleeping chamber, assassinating him, and disposing of the body.

"If that man were you, Mr. Bayard, fortified by ten days'

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intensive briefing, and carrying a small net-communicator, we believe that you could assume the identity of the dead man and rule as absolute dictator over Bayard's twenty million fighting men."

"Do I have another double here?" I said, "in your Imperium?"

Bernadotte shook his head. "No, you have remote cousins here; nothing closer."

They were going a little too fast for me. Richthofen had leaned back in his chair and was looking at me in a satisfied way, as though everything was settled now. Goering was plainly waiting in suspense for my reaction, while General Bernadotte, with apparent unconcern, shuffled some papers before him.

I could see that all three of them expected me to act solemn and modest at the honor, and set out to do or die for the Fatherland. They were overlooking a few things, though. This wasn't my Fatherland; I'd been kidnapped here. And oddly enough, maybe, I could not see myself murdering anybody—especially, I had the grotesque thought—myself. I didn't even like the idea of being dropped down in the midst of a pack of torturers.

I was facing facts; I was 42 years old, a disillusioned middle-aged diplomat, accustomed to the stodgy routines of Embassy life and the administration of the cynical and colorless policies of an ineffectual State Department. True, among my colleagues of the Foreign Service, I had been rather less ossified physically and mentally than the average, something of a rebel, even; but this kind of hair-raising escapade was not in my line at all.

I was ready to tell them so in very definite terms, when my eye fell on Bale. He was wearing a supercillious half-smile, and I could see that this was just what he expected. His contempt for me was plain. I sensed that he thought of me—almost—as the man who had killed his best agent in cold blood, a cowardly blackguard. My mouth was open to speak; but under that sneering expression, different words came out; temporizing words. I wouldn't give Bale the satisfaction of being right.

"And after I'm in charge of B-I Two, what then?" I said.

"You will be in constant touch with Imperial Intelligence via communicator." Richthofen spoke eagerly. "You'll receive detailed instructions as to each move you'll make. We should be able to immobilize B-I Two within six months. You'll then be returned here."

"I won't be returned home?"

"Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said seriously, "you will never

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be able to return to B-I Three. The Imperium will offer you any reward you wish to name, except that. The consequences of revealing the existence of the Imperium to your line at this time are far too serious to permit consideration of the idea."

"That's not giving me much of a break," I said. "You people seem to take a lot of pride in your high ethical standards. How does this fit in?"

There was a note of anger in Richthofen's tone as he spoke up. "The continued well-being of the Imperium is at stake, Mr. Bayard," he said. "Perhaps even its continued existence. We consider the Imperium to be an institution worth preserving, at whatever cost of individual discomfort or inconvenience. We regret having to infringe your personal rights; but in the cause of Humanity, it is necessary."

Bernadotte spoke in a more conciliatory tone. "There is another, more personal consideration which we can offer to you, Mr. Bayard," he said. "You do not of course know that same devotion to the cause of the Imperium as do we, who have in our lifetimes seen the change it has brought to a petty, brawling, narrow world. We do not expect that you would be eager to risk your life in the service of what perhaps seems to you simply another foreign state. We are prepared to go to great lengths to provide an adequate incentive to you to help us, in the one way in which only you can serve.

"According to the dossier which we compiled, we noted that both of your parents were so unfortunate as to lose their lives in the wreck of an airship in 1953." He paused and looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded. What was this all about? I didn't like being reminded of that bitter night when the airliner on which they had been bound for Europe for a holiday and a visit with me had gone down into the Atlantic.

"We have made an investigation in B-I Two; in that line both of your parents are alive and well."

Bernadotte waited for the effect, then continued. "Since they did not approve of the conduct of their son, the Dictator Bayard, they were not incorporated into the official household, but were established in comfort on an estate in the south of France. They had previously been North African *Colons*, you understand."

I was dumbfounded. I remembered hearing many times as a boy the story of how my father had flipped a great silver 5-franc piece to decide whether to emmigrate to North Africa or to North America. In the world I

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knew, America had been the decision. But in this other strange universe, they had become North Africans; and they still lived!

There was too much that was new, undreamed of, coming at me all at once. I couldn't assimilate it. I'd been very fond of my parents. All I could think of was that perhaps once again I'd meet them, my mother and father, beyond all expectation. . . .

Bernadotte was still talking. ". . . will of course place them together with you, in whatever setting you elect."

Bernadotte addressed Bale. "Do you have the information on Mr. Bayard's military service?"

Bale spoke from memory. "Mr. Bayard served for two years with the rank of Captain, later Major, in the Army of the United State of America. . ."

"United *States*," I said; "plural." I enjoyed correcting Bale; he thought he was pretty good at this memory bit. He glared, but continued.

". . . during a world-wide war, from 1942-1944. He received a slight wound, and was invalided out just prior to the cessation of hostilities."

Bale annoyed me. Slight wound hell. I had a scar on my chest and a bigger one on my back, just to the left of the spine; machine gun slugs make a bigger hole leaving than they do going in.

All eyes were on Bernadotte. He looked as though what he was about to say was important.

"I have been authorized by the Emergency Cabinet," he said with gravity, "to offer you an Imperial commission in the rank of Major General, Mr. Bayard. If you accept this commission, your first assignment will be as we have outlined." Bernadotte handed a heavy piece of parchment across the table to me. "You should know, Mr. Bayard, that the Imperium does not award commissions, particularly as General Officer, lightly."

"It will be a most unusual rank," Goering said, smiling. "Normally there is no such rank in the Imperium Service; Lieutenant General, Colonel General Major General. You will be unique."

"We adopted the rank from your own armed forces, as a special mark of esteem, Mr. Bayard," Bernadotte said. "It is no less authentic for being unusual."

It was a fancy sheet of paper. The Imperium was prepared to pay off well for this job they needed done. Anything I wanted, even things I hadn't conceived of. . . . I think they thought the strange look on my face was greed at the thought of a general's two stars. Well, let them

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think it. I didn't want to give them any more information which might be used against me.

"I'll think about it," I said. Bale looked disconcerted now. After expecting me to back out, he had apparently then expected me to be dazzled by all the rewards I was being offered. I'd let him worry about it. Suddenly Bale bored me.

Bernadotte hesitated. "I'm going to take an unprecedented step, Mr. Bayard," he said. "For the present, on my personal initiative as head of State, I'm confirming you as Colonel in the Royal Army of Sweden without condition. I do this to show my personal confidence in you, as well as for more practical reasons." He rose and smiled ruefully, as though unsure of my reaction. "Congratulations, Colonel," he said, holding out his hand.

I stood up too. I noticed everyone had.

It was my turn to hesitate. I looked him in the eye. Chief of State he'd said. No wonder he'd looked like the King of Sweden; he *was* the king. And he'd introduced himself simply as General Bernadotte. I liked him. I took his hand.

"Thank you, sir," I said. On impulse, I stepped back a pace and threw him a snappy US-type salute. He returned it with a wide smile.

"You may have twenty-four hours to consider your decision, Colonel," he said. "I'll leave you in the excellent care of Graf von Richthofen and Mr. Goering until then."

Richthofen turned to Winter, still standing silently by. "Won't you join us, Chief Captain," he said.

"Delighted," Winter said.

"Congratulations, old boy, er, Sir," Winter said as soon as we were in the hall. "You made quite a hit with the general." He seemed quite his jaunty self again.

I eyed him. "You mean King Gustav?" I said.

Winter blinked. "But how did you know," he said. "I mean, dash it, how the devil did you know?"

"I have my methods," I said. It was my turn to be mysterious.

"But it must be," Goering said with enthusiasm, "that also he in your home world is known, not so?"

"That's right, Mr. Goering," I said, "now you've dispelled my aura of mystery."

Goering chuckled. "Please, Mr. Bayard, you must call me Hermann." He gripped me on the bicep in friendly fashion as we moved down the hall. "Now you must tell us more about this intriguing world of yours."

I found myself liking Goering.

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After all, he was no more the brutal cynic of the Luftwaffe than I was the dictator of a ruined world.

Richthofen spoke up. "I suggest we go along to my summer villa at Drottningholm and enjoy a dinner and a couple of good vintages while we hear all about your home, Mr. Bayard; and we shall tell you of ours."

He smiled and added, "We're not often so solemn;" he nodded toward the room we had just left. "I'm afraid the spirit of our colleague Bale dominated the meeting."

"Just so," Hermann said. "This has been always the failing of the English; everything is taken with such gravity, just because of a little threat to our existence; no real German battle-joy, you see." He winked at Winter to show it was not ill-meant.

"Now about Chief Captain Winter," he went on. "What is his place in the B-I Three? We should all make a guess. I say a hairdresser, such delicate hands."

"Now, I say, Reichsmarshall," Winter began with mock asperity, then burst out laughing. "I say, actually, Bayard," he said, "what kind of troops did Mr. Goering command back there in B-I Three? Swiss Navy, that sort of thing?"

"Yes," Hermann said. "You don't mind if I call you Brion? Now, was I a brave commander, or did I show my heels to the enemy?"

"You were a fighter pilot, Hermann," I said. "You were an ace; you shot down over twenty planes in aerial battle in World War One."

I added nothing about Goering's later, less savory career. This fellow had nothing in common with the gross Goering of Nazi Germany.

"Better and better, Brion," Hermann said gleefully. "You see, Manfred, I am a bold fellow after all."

"I say," Winter put in. "World War One, you said. You chaps have had to resort to numbering to keep them straight? How does anyone survive?" He sounded genuinely shocked.

"When did it occur, this war in which our Hermann played such a part?" Richthofen asked, as we entered the elevator.

"From 1914 to 1918," I said. I had a thought. I realized why his name was familiar to me. Manfred Rittmeister, Friherr von Richthofen, Germany's leading ace. Hadn't Bernadotte called him Manfred? I glanced at him. He looked about the right age. A coincidence, or had the Imperium set out to dazzle me with luminaries?

"You were another famous fighter pilot, Graf von Richthofen," I said. "You scored seventy

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victories; they called you the Red Knight."

Hermann shouted out with laughter. "Hermann and Manfred, the Terrible Two," he said. "What a pair of fighters we are, not so?"

Richthofen smiled a slight smile. "What you tell us sounds remarkably like our boyhood dreams of martial glory, Mr. Bayard," he said. "Quite foreign to our actual selves. We are fortunate that we live in a world where such ferocious ambitions are outgrown and we can mature to more productive endeavor." He glanced fondly at Hermann. "Our friend Goering here plays the clown, and is in fact a fellow of boundless good nature; but he is also one of the most astute planners on the staff of our German Intelligence Service."

"And the modest von Richthofen," Hermann said, "is the chief of that same service; a position of great importance in this age of the Maxoni device."

We emerged from the building and entered another of the immense black cars, which awaited us with engine idling.

"It's astonishing," Winter said, "how many figures you have encountered already who are eminent in your own world."

"Not so astonishing," I said. They're eminent here, too; ability counts in any world, I see."

"I say," Winter said, "that's a bit of a blow to my ego, old boy; I should like to have been a bigwig in some environment; by your rule, I'm condemned to monotonous anonymity."

The car took the center of a broad tree-lined avenue, sweeping along at fifty, then sixty. Through the window, Stockholm looked gayer in color than the city I knew. We crossed a bridge, for which we slowed slightly, then whirled up a steep street, down another, and followed a wide straight highway out of town into parklike countryside. My companions, or escort, chatted gaily, and I joined in, feeling a quickening of interest in this alien world of the Imperium. There was a vitality here, an *esprit* to which I couldn't help responding.

V

I stood before a long mirror and eyed myself, not without approval. Two tailors and a valet had been buzzing around me like bees for half an hour, putting the finishing touches on their handiwork. I had to admit they had done all right.

It had been a long time since I had taken much interest in the clothes I wore. Every two years, between assignments, I had dutifully re-equipped myself for the next tour with the standard wardrobe of drab business suits,

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nothing which might attract possibly unfavorable attention to a diplomatic member of an Embassy staff.

Now I wore narrow-cut riding breeches of fine grey whipcord; short black boots of meticulously stitched and polished black leather; a white linen shirt without collar or cuffs beneath a mess jacket of Royal Blue, buttoned to the chin. A gold bordered blue stripe ran down the side of the trousers and heavy loops of gold braid ringed the sleeves from wrist to elbow. A black leather belt with a large square buckle bearing the Royal Swedish crest supported a jeweled scabbard containing a slender rapier with an ornate hilt. In the proper position on the left side of the chest were, to my astonishment, a perfectly accurate set of my World War II service medals and the Silver Star. On the shoulder straps, the bright silver eagles of a U. S. Colonel gleamed. I was wearing the full dress uniform of my new position in the Imperium society.

The valet squatted on the floor, adjusting a pair of silver spurs, while the tailors mouthed pins and conferred over the details of the gold-lined blue cape. I looked at the mirror and readied the usual disparaging comments that the sight of this regalia would require at home; then I checked myself. Damn it, I thought, I might as well be honest with myself; I look great! This is the way a man ought to dress when he goes to a party.

I was glad now I hadn't let myself deteriorate into the flabby ill-health of the average Foreign Service Officer, soft and pale from long hours in offices and late hours of heavy drinking at the interminable diplomatic functions. My shoulders were reasonably broad, my back reasonably straight; no paunch marred the lines of my new finery. This outfit made a man look like a man; how the devil had we gotten into the habit of draping ourselves in shapeless double-breasted suits, in mousy colors, of identical cut?

Goering was sitting in a brocaded armchair in the luxurious suite to which Richthofen had shown me in his 'little villa'.

"You cut a martial figure, Brion," he said. "It is plain to see you have for this new job a natural aptitude."

"I wouldn't count on it, Hermann," I said. His comment had reminded me of the other side of the coin; the deadly plans the Imperium had in mind for me. Well, I could settle that later. Tonight I was going to enjoy myself.

Over a dinner of pheasant served on a sunny terrace in the long Swedish summer evening,

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Richthofen had explained to me that, in Swedish society, to be without a title was an extremely awkward social encumbrance. It was not that one needed an exalted position, he assured me; merely that there must be something for others to call one; Herr Doctor, Herr Professor, Ingenjör, Redaktör; my military status would ease my entry into the world of the Imperium.

It had sounded like a silly masquerade at first, but by the time we finished off the third bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape, 1953, it was all settled. Tonight was the night of the Empire Day Ball, and we'd all go. I might as well; I was here, and what the hell, I thought. As for the uniform, the King had said no strings attached; and I was over-due for a good time.

Winter came in then, carrying what looked at first like a crystal ball.

"Your topper, sir," he said with a flourish. What he had was a chrome-plated steel helmet, with a rib running along the top, and a gold dyed plume growing out of it.

"Good God," I said. "Isn't that overdoing it a little?" I took the helmet; it was feather light, I discovered. The tailor took over, placed the helmet just so, handed me a pair of white leather gloves, and faded out.

"You have to have it, old boy," Winter said. "Dragoons, you know."

"You are complete," Hermann said. "A masterpiece."

He was wearing a dark grey uniform with black trim and white insignia. He had a respectable but not excessive display of ribbons and orders.

"Hermann," I said expansively, "you should have seen yourself when you were all rigged out in your medals back home. They came down to here," I indicated my knees. He laughed.

Together we left the suite and went down to the study on the ground floor. Winter, I noted, had changed from his whites to a pale yellow mess jacket with heavy silver braid and a nickle-plated Luger.

Richthofen showed up moments later; his outfit consisted of what looked like a set of tails, circa 1880, with silver buttons and a white beret.

"We're a cool bunch of cats," I said. I was feeling swell. I caught another glimpse of myself in a mirror. "Sharp, daddy-o," I murmured.

A liveried butler swung the glass door open for us and we descended the steps to a waiting car. This one was a vast yellow phaeton, with the top down. We slid into our places on the smooth yellow leather seats and it eased off down the drive.

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It was a magnificent night, with high clouds and a brilliant moon. In the distance, the lights of the city glittered. We rolled smoothly along, the engine so silent that the sound of the wind in the tall trees along the way was clearly audible.

I had had a good general briefing at dinner on the current state of world affairs, and on the people I might expect to meet tonight. It appeared that the Imperium was not the only important state in this new world after all. A New Roman Empire had inherited much of the domain of its remote predecessor, and now competed in the far corners of the globe for mastery of what still remained uncommitted of Africa, Asia, the Polynesian Isles; the traditionally colonial, backward areas of the world. The rivalry, however, was of a new kind. The great powers competed in the speed and efficiency with which they developed these ancient pestholes of famine, disease, and ignorance into members of modern society. There were a few little wars going on, but I got the impression they were conducted under rules as rigid as any cricket match.

"Civilized man," Richthofen had said, "has a responsibility. His is not the privilege of abdicating the position he holds as leader in the world. His culture represents the best achievements so far made by man in his long climb up from primordial beginnings. We have inherited the fruits of the struggle to master hostile nature, to conquer disease, to harness natural forces; we are less than true men if we allow these achievements to be lost, to leave vast areas to the ancient enemy, ignorance, or worst of all, to lose by default our hard-won position, to retreat before the savage, the backward in the name of enlightened social ideas. We have a duty to perform; not to narrow nationalistic policies, not to false ideas of superiority based on religions, social position, untenable racial theories, skin color; but to mankind, that all shall benefit from the real superiority of our western culture, which is bringing man up off his knees into the light of his glorious future."

"Here here," said Winter.

It sounded like a campaign speech, I thought, but I couldn't argue with it. I'd seen enough starving babies during my duty in the Orient to feel no patience with the policy of letting backward peoples suffer under the rule of local bosses, just because they were local. "Self determination of peoples" they'd called it. A lot like self-determination of kindergarten kids dominated by a bully. I preferred a world in which every human born had a

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chance at the best humanity had learned, rather than being sacrificed to the neuroses, hatreds, manias and over-compensations for inferiority of petty provincial leaders.

What we lacked, back in my world, I thought, was a sense of responsibility, and the courage to assume the burden of leadership. Here they hadn't hung back; right or wrong, they couldn't be accused of vacillation.

"Boys," I said, "I like you, even if you are a bunch of kidnappers."

Manfred looked at me. "I think the day will come, my friend," he said, "when you will forgive us for that crime."

Goering had thought to bring along a small flask, and by the time we had each tapped it twice we were passing through the iron gates of the Summer Palace. Colored floodlights bathed the gardens and people already filled the terraces on the south and west sides of the building. The car dropped us before the gigantic entry and moved off, as we made our way through the crowd, and into the reception hall.

Light from massive crystal chandeliers glittered on gowns and uniforms, polished boots and jewels, silks, brocades, velvet. A straight-backed man in rose-pink bowed over the hand of a lovely blonde in white. A slender black-clad fellow with a gold and white sash escorted a lady in green gold toward the ballroom. The din of laughter and conversation almost drowned out the strains of the waltz in the background.

"All right, boys," I said. "Where's the punchbowl?"

I don't often set out to get stewed, but when I do, I don't believe in half measures. I was feeling great, and wanted to keep it that way. At the moment I couldn't feel the bruises from my fall, my indignation over being grabbed was forgotten, and as for tomorrow, I couldn't care less. I was having a wonderful time. I hoped I wouldn't see Bale's sour face.

Everybody talked, asked me eager questions, made introductions. I found myself talking to someone I finally recognized as Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.; he was a tough-looking old fellow in a naval uniform. I met counts, dukes, officers of a dozen ranks I'd never heard of, several princes, and finally a short broad-shouldered man with a heavy sun tan and a go-to-hell smile whom I finally realized was the son of the Emperor.

I was still walking and talking like a million dollars, but somewhere along the line I'd lost what little tact I normally had.

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"Well, Prince William," I said, maybe weaving just a little, "I understood the House of Hanover-Windsor was the ruling line here. Where I come from the Hanovers and Windsors are all tall, skinny, and glum-looking."

The Prince smiled. "Here, Colonel," he said, "a policy was established which put an end to that unfortunate situation. The Constitution requires that the male heir marry a commoner. This not only makes life more pleasant for the heir, with so many beatufiful commoners to choose from, but maintains the vigor of the line. And it incidentally produces short men with happy faces occasionally."

I moved on, meeting people, eating little sandwiches, drinking everything from aquavit to beer, and dancing with one heavenly-looking girl after another. For the first time in my life my ten years of Embassy elbow-bending were standing me in good stead; from the grim experience gained through seven evenings a week of holding a drink in my hand from sundown till midnight while pumping other members of the Diplomatic Corps who thought they were pumping me, I had emerged with a skill; I could hold my liquor.

Somewhere along the line I felt the need for a breath of fresh air and stepped out through the tall french door onto a dark balustraded gallery overlooking gardens. I leaned on the heavy stone rail, looked up at stars visible through tall tree-tops, and waited for the buzzing in my head to die down a little.

The night air moved in a cool torrent over the dark lawn, carrying the scent of flowers. Behind me the orchestra played a tune that was almost, but not quite, a Strauss waltz.

I pulled off the white gloves that Richthofen had told me I should keep on when I left my helmet at the checkroom. I unbuttoned the top button of the tight-fitting jacket.

I'm getting old, I thought; or maybe just tired.

"And why are you tired, Colonel?" a cool feminine voice inquired from behind me.

I turned around. "Ah, there you are," I said. "I'm glad. I'd rather be guilty of talking out loud than of imagining voices."

I worked on focussing my eyes a little better. She had red hair, and wore a pale pink gown that started low and stayed with the subject.

"I'm *very* glad, as a matter of fact," I added. "I like beautiful redheads who appear out of nowhere."

"Not out of nowhere, Colonel," she said. "From in there, where it is so warm and crowded."

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She spoke excellent English in a low voice, with just enough Swedish accent to render her tritest speech charming.

"Precisely," I said. "All those people were making me just a little bit drunk, so I came out here to recover." I was wearing a silly smile, and having a thoroughly good time being so eloquent and clever with this delightful young lady.

"My father has told me that you are not born to the Imperium, Colonel," she said. "And that you come from a world where all is the same, yet different. It should be so interesting to hear about it."

"Why talk about that place?" I said. "We've forgotten how to have fun back there. We take ourselves very seriously, and we figure out the most elaborate excuses for doing the rottenest things to each other. . . ."

I shook my head. I didn't like that train of thought. "See," I said, "I always talk like that with my gloves off." I pulled them on again. "And now," I said grandly, "may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

She smiled and held out her hand, and we danced. We moved along closer to the music—or away from the light from the french doors. We talked and laughed while one waltz followed another.

Suddenly I paused. "Don't those boys know anything but waltzes?" I asked.

"You don't like waltzes?" she said.

"Sure, they're great, but wait a minute, I've got an idea." I took her hand and led her back through the french doors, across the floor, around behind a row of giant tropical plants to the concealed orchestra.

I signalled the leader as the musicians paused for a brief break. He came over.

"Yes, Colonel?" he smiled.

"How good are you?" I asked. "I mean . . ." I tried to figure out how to get it across. "If I hum a tune," I said, "can you play it?"

"That depends on how well you hum, Colonel," he said.

"OK, assuming I hum all right, can you get the tune and play it, with all the trimmings?"

"I think so," he said.

"What about in a different tempo?"

He frowned. "Could you give me an example?"

I was holding my girl's hand. "Listen," I said. I tried a few bars of 'Night and Day'. He looked interested. I cleared my throat and said. "Now get this. It's a great number."

I hummed 'Night and Day' all the way through for him twice. The members of the orchestra gathered around and listened.

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"All right, Colonel," he said. "I have it, I think." He hummed it back to me. He had the tempo.

"All right, Gentlemen," he said to the others, "let's try it."

The players returned to their places. The leader turned to me and nodded, with a wink, and raised his arms. "Watch the tempo!" he cautioned the musicians.

"Come on," I said. I grabbed my girl's hand and we headed back for the floor.

The music started, softly at first, but smooth and sure. The beat was heavy, but good; the melody clear and true as only experts can make it.

Couples about to begin a waltz paused, and looked toward the source of the music. The band was warming to its work now. Like the masters they were, they slid easily into orchestration effects that brought out the best of the old tune.

"Just follow me," I said. She came into my arms. "Closer," I said. "This is no waltz."

The other dancers faded back as if by signal, and an excited murmur ran around the room. My partner was a natural. Without faltering, she followed me through first the simplest and then the more complex of the infinite variations on the basic fox-trot theme that I had practiced as one of the standard diplomatic skills at a thousand dull affairs.

Her eyes were shining as she looked at me. "A strange song," she said. "A strange man."

The orchestra finished a third refrain of the old tune and without a pause eased into one of their old numbers, but rearranged to the new tempo. They were good.

People began tentatively trying out the new music on the floor, watching us, and laughing excitedly as they caught on. In a few minutes the floor was crowded again.

As the music stopped, they crowded around. "What is it called?" they asked. "Wonderful;" "The first really new music in years. Show us another."

We went back, amid a crowd, and congratulated the orchestra. They beamed.

"Want to try another?" I asked the smiling leader. He was eager to go, so I hummed 'Stardust', 'I'll Get By', more Cole Porter, whatever I could think of. The leader was like a miner panning out egg-sized nuggets. They played them all, the old familiar tunes, with an odd otherworld flavor.

"I love your music," my girl said. "In a few days it will be heard in every town in the Empire."

They wanted more, and more. I gave them 'All the Things You

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Are', 'Moon Love', and finally 'Begin the Beguine'. The crowd went crazy when they finished, clapping and cheering and demanding more.

The orchestra had just begun the encore when a shattering blast rocked the floor, and the tall glass doors along the east side of the ballroom blew in. Through the cloud of dust which followed up the explosion, a swarm of men in motley remnants of uniforms leaped into the room. The leader, a black-bearded giant wearing a faded and patched U. S. Army-type forest green battle jacket and baggy Wehrmacht trousers, jacked the lever on the side of a short drum-fed machine gun, and squeezed a long burst into the thick of the crowd.

While I stood frozen, a tall man with blood on his face, wearing the deep purple of the Imperial Guards Regiment, leaped forward from the front rank of the crowd which had recoiled from the explosion, whipping out his sabre. The gunner whirled toward him, and fired two rounds before the gun jammed. I heard them smack into the man in purple, knocking him backwards. He rolled over, rose to his knees, still gripping the sabre, eyes fixed on the bearded man who cursed and jerked at the operating lever. The officer rose to his feet and lunged, arm and sabre one rigid line aimed at the other's chest. The sabre slammed against the forest green, as the man in purple collapsed amid rubble from the smashed windows. The curtains flapped around the bearded man as he dropped the gun, and gripped with both hands the hilt which protruded from his chest. I watched as he strained at it, and it moved. He was still on his feet, his back arched, biceps bursting through the rotted fabric of the ancient uniform. The blade came sliding out bright and clean. I stared, fascinated. He had it almost clear when his legs folded and he crashed to the floor.

While I had watched this violent exchange, men had poured through the broached wall, firing into the crowd. Men and women alike fell under the murdering attack, but every man who remained on his feet rushed the nearest attacker without hesitation. Standing in the rubble, a bristle-faced redhead wearing an undersized British sergeant's blouse pumped eight shots from the hip, knocking down an oncoming officer of the Imperium with every shot; when he stepped back to jam a new clip into the M-1, the ninth man ran him through the throat with a jewel-encrusted rapier.

I still stood frozen, holding my girl's hand. I whirled, started

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to shout to her to get back, to run; but the calm look I saw in her eyes stopped me. She'd rather be decently dead than flee this rabble.

I jerked my toy sword from its scabbard, dashed to the wall, and moved along it to the edge of the gaping opening. As the next man pushed through the cloud of dust and smoke, peering ahead, gripping a shotgun, I jammed the point of my sword into his neck, hard, and jerked it back before it was wrenched from my hands. He stumbled on, choking, the shotgun falling with a clatter. I reached out, raked it in, as another man appeared. He carried a Colt .45 in his left hand, and he saw me as I saw him. He swivelled to fire, and as he did I brought the poised blade down on his arm. The shot went into the floor and the pistol bounced out of the loose hand. He fell back into the trampling crowd.

There was the stamp and grating of feet, the cursing and shouting of the attackers, the insistent ragged close range firing, groans from wounded on the floor; and behind, the orchestra calmly struck up the Imperial Anthem. There were no screams from the women, no yells for mercy from a man of the Imperium. They came on silently, dying ten to one, but never pausing.

Another fellow lunged out of the dust, cutting across the room, and saw me. He levelled a heavy rifle on its side across his left forearm. He moved slowly and clumsily. I saw that his left hand was hanging by a thread. I grabbed up the shotgun and blew his face off. It had been about two minutes since the explosion.

I waited a moment, but no more came through the blasted window. I saw a wiry ruffian with long yellow hair falling back toward me as he pushed another magazine into a Browning automatic rifle. I jumped two steps, set the point of the sword just about where the kidneys should be, and rammed with both hands. Not very elegant style, I thought, but I'm just a beginner.

I saw Goering then, arms around a tall fellow who cursed and struggled to raise his battered sub-machine gun. A gun roared in my ear and the back of my neck burned. I realized my jump had literally saved my neck. I ran around to the side of the grappling pair, and shoved the blade into the thin man's ribs. It grated and stuck, but he wilted. I'm not much of a sport, I thought, but I guess guns against pig-stickers makes it even.

Hermann stepped back, spat disgustedly, and leaped on the

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nearest bandit. I wrenched at my sword, but it was wedged tight. I left it and grabbed up the tommy gun. A long-legged villain was just closing the chamber of his revolver as I pumped a burst into his stomach. I saw dust fly from the shabby cloth of his coat as the slugs smacked home.

I glanced around. Several of the men of the Imperium were firing captured guns now, and the remnant of the invading mob had fallen back toward the shattered wall. Bullets cut them down as they stood at bay, still pouring out a ragged fire. None of them tried to flee.

I ran forward, sensing something wrong. I raised my gun and cut down a bloody-faced man as he stood firing two .45 automatics. My last round nicked a heavy-set carbine man, and the drum was empty. I picked up another weapon from the floor, as one lone thug still standing pounded the bolt of his rifle with his palm.

"Take him alive," someone shouted. The firing stopped and a dozen men seized the struggling man. The crowd milled, women bending over those who lay on the floor, men staggering from their exertions. I ran toward the billowing drapes.

"Come on," I shouted. "Outside . . ." I didn't have time or breath to say more, or to see if anyone came. I leaped across the rubble, out onto the blasted terrace, leaped the rail, and landed in the garden, sprawled a little, but still moving. In the light of the colored floods a grey-painted van, ponderously bulky, sat askew across flower beds. Beside it, three tattered crewmen struggled with a bulky load. A small tripod stood on the lawn, awaiting the mounting of their burden. I had time for one momentary mental vision of what a fission bomb would do to the Summer Palace and its occupants, before I dashed at them with a yell. I fired the pistol I had grabbed, as fast as I could pull the trigger, and the three men hesitated, pulled against each other, cursed, and started back toward the open door of their van with the bomb. One of them fell, and I realized someone behind me was firing accurately. Another of the men yelped and ran off a few yards to crumple on the grass. The third jumped for the open door, and a moment later a rush of air threw dust against my face as the van flicked out of existence. The sound was like a pool of gasoline igniting.

The bulky package lay on the ground now, ominous. I felt sure it was not yet armed. I turned to the others. "Don't touch this thing," I called. "I'm sure it's some kind of atomic bomb."

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"Nice work, old boy," a familiar voice said. It was Winter, blood spattered on the pale yellow of his tunic. "Might have known those chaps were fighting a delaying action for a reason. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said, breathless. "Let's get back inside. They'll need tourniquets and men to twist them."

We picked our way through the broken glass, fragments of flagstone, and splinters of framing, past the flapping drapes, into the brightly lit dust-rolled ballroom.

Dead and wounded lay in a rough semi-circle around the broken wall. I recognized a pretty brunette in a blue dress whom I had danced with earlier, lying on the floor, face waxen. Everyone was splattered with crimson. I looked around frantically for my red-head, and saw her kneeling beside a wounded man, binding his head.

There was a shout. Winter and I whirled. One of the wounded intruders moved, threw something, then collapsed as shots struck him. I heard the thump and rattle as the object fell, and as in a dream I watched the grenade roll over and over, clattering, stop ten feet away and spin a half a turn. I stood, frozen. Finished, I thought. And I never even learned her name.

From behind me I heard a gasp as Winter leaped past me and threw himself forward. He landed spread-eagled over the grenade as it exploded with a muffled thump, throwing Winter two feet into the air.

I staggered, and turned away, dizzy. Poor Winter. Poor damned Winter.

I felt myself passing out, and went to my knees. The floor was tilting . . .

She was bending over me, face pale, but still steady.

I reached up and touched her hand. "What's your name?" I said.

"My name?" she said. "Barbro Lundane; I thought you knew my name . . ." She seemed a bit dazed. I sat up. "Better lend a hand to someone who's worse off than I am, Barbro," I said. "I just have a weak constitution."

"No," she said. "You've bled much."

Richthofen appeared, looking grim. He helped me up. My neck and head ached. "Thank God you are alive," he said.

"Thank Winter I'm alive," I replied. "I don't suppose there's a chance . . .?"

"Killed instantly," Richthofen said. "He knew his duty."

"Poor guy," I said. "It should have been me."

"We're fortunate it wasn't you," Richthofen said. "It was

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close. As it is, you've lost considerable blood. You must come along and rest now."

"I want to stay here," I said. "Maybe I can do something useful."

Goering had appeared from somewhere, and he laid an arm across my shoulders, leading me away.

"Calmly, now, my friend," he said. "There is no need to feel it so strongly; he died in performance of his duty, as he would have wished."

Hermann knew what was bothering me. I could have blanked out that grenade as easily as Winter, but the thought hadn't even occurred to me. If I hadn't been paralyzed, I'd have run.

I didn't struggle; I felt washed out, suddenly suffering a premature hangover. Manfred joined us at the car, and we drove home in near silence. I asked about the bomb and Goering said that Bale's men had taken it over. "Tell them to dump it at sea," I said.

At the villa, someone waited on the steps as we drove up. I recognized Bale's rangy figure with the undersized head. I ignored him as he collared Hermann.

I went into the dining room, poured a stiff drink at the sideboard, sat down.

The others came behind me, talking. I wondered where Bale had been all evening.

Bale sat down, eyeing me. He wanted to hear all about the attack. He seemed to take the news calmly but sourly.

He looked at me, pursing his lips. "Mr. Goering has told me that you conducted yourself quite well, Mr. Bayard, during the fight. Perhaps I was hasty in my judgment of you . . ."

"Who the hell cares what you think, Bale?" I said. "Where were you when the lead was flying? Under the rug? You've got a hell of a lot of gall strutting in here and delivering your pompous opinion." I was getting madder by the second.

Bale turned white, stood up glaring and stalked out of the room. Goering cleared his throat and Manfred cast an odd look at me as he rose to perform his hostly duty of conducting a guest to the door.

"Inspector Bale is not a man easy to associate with," Hermann said. "I understand your feeling." He rose and came around the table.

"I feel you should know," he went on, "that he is among the most skillful with sabre and epee. Make no hasty decision now . . ."

"What decision?" I asked.

"Already you have a painful wound," he said; now we must

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not allow you to be laid up at this critical time. Are you sure of your skill with a pistol?"

"What wound?" I said. "You mean my neck?" I put my hand up to touch it. I winced; there was a deep gouge, caked with blood. Suddenly I was aware that the back of my jacket was soggy. That near-miss was a little nearer than I had thought.

"I hope you will accord Manfred and myself the honor of seconding you," Hermann continued, "and perhaps of advising you . . ."

"What's this all about, Hermann?" I said. "What do you mean: seconding me?"

"Why," he seemed confused, "we wish to stand with you in your meeting with Bale . . ."

"Meeting with Bale?" I repeated. I know I didn't sound very bright. I was beginning to realize how lousy I felt.

Goering stopped and looked at me. "Inspector Bale is a man most sensitive of personal dignity," he said. "You have given him a tongue-lashing before witnesses, and a well deserved one it was; however, it remains a certainty that he will demand satisfaction." He saw that I was still groping. "Bale will challenge you, Brion," he said. "You must fight him."

(Continued next month)

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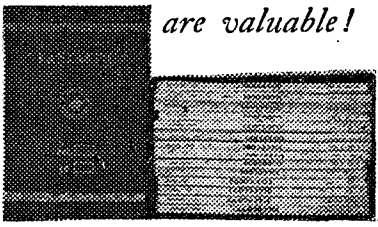

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Old Craig was delighted when the magic worked. He could punish his enemy, and have the world's most beautiful girl. Luck was finally on his side. But Craig forgot about . . .

THE OTHER SIDE

By ARTHUR PORGES

DR. CRAIG came upon the set of incantations through a fortunate accident. He had just returned from an irritating Saturday session in the basement of his old wooden house, where he was waging a weekend war with the termites. No doubt it was his concentration upon the minute evidence of insect damage that made him notice the similar deterioration of the leather cover of Castrucci's "Commentaries." (Cologne; 1479)

On examining the damage, he was amazed and delighted to find hidden in the binding a sheaf of parchment, closely scribbled by some unknown penman of the Fifteenth Century. Deciphering the crabbed dog-Latin was a routine matter for Craig, a paleographer of much experience, Head of the Department of Medieval History of Bateman College.

The incantations aroused his interest at once, partly because of the dry, under-emphasized manner in which the writer cited details of his experiments. More convincing, however, was his complaint that since employment of the sorcery depended upon the possession of an exact likeness of the subject, he was ever at the mercy of those few disreputable artists whom he hired to depict his enemies. Unfortunately, it was seldom indeed that the portraits were good

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enough to implement the spells; and, in addition, the author did not dare ask the painters to portray the great nobles he most desired to harass. The penalties against witchcraft in medieval Europe were far too terrible to risk betrayal.

Since anyone reading the manuscript was bound to think of his own enemies, Dr. Craig's thoughts turned immediately to Professor Randall. Although ten years younger than Craig, he had long surpassed him in his chosen field. Starting as his junior at Bateman, Randall had quickly earned equal rank, and then accepted a position at Midwestern University. From there he had published one brilliant monograph after another, and now, while Craig stagnated at Bateman, he was Chairman of the whole Humanities Division at Midwestern, with its 15,000 students and enormous endowment.

As if to salt these wounds, Professor Randall's latest paper had pitilessly demolished Craig's life work, his massive "History of the First Crusade," exposing, with detailed evidence, the poor documentation, anti-clerical bias, and shaky generalizations of the writer.

Ironically enough, Randall had suggested that Craig seemed to think like a Twelfth Century man—that he had a medieval mind. There was nothing in his dry, rigorous analysis more to the point, had he but known it.

For almost an hour Dr. Craig poured over the sheets of parchment. There were incantations for tormenting one's foes, and also for destroying them utterly in various nasty ways. There were others to make a helpless leman of any woman; and a particularly involved one that might, if properly handled, devastate a city. And all of these depended primarily upon the exact likeness the anonymous writer had found it so difficult to acquire.

When he had learned enough to content him, Craig rose, and going to his study, brought back a recent issue of the "Journal of Medieval History." The frontispiece was an excellent full-length photograph of the publication's new editor, Professor Walter Randal. On the back, in a neat box, was a summary of his scholarly career.

A crooked smile touched Craig's mouth. There was nothing to lose by trying, he reflected. Modern researches on psychosomatic medicine, the Rhine experiments, and many other off-trail investigations, implied to any impartial philosopher the essential truth of Hamlet's remark to Horatio. "There *are* more things in heav-

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en and earth," Craig murmured; "and this could be one of them." He fetched a pair of scissors and went to work.

After pasting the portrait of Randall to a sheet of stiff cardboard, he cut around the likeness, paper-doll fashion, snipping with the utmost care. An exact likeness, the writer had stressed; well, Twentieth Century photography had solved that problem perfectly.

It was now time for the actual words of power. This being Saturday, with no classes in session, Randall would be at home. No doubt he was busy in his study—perhaps another mordant critique would soon appear in print. Not unless it was already in the mail, Craig told himself hopefully. Then he leaned the stiffened portrait upright against an ink-well and stared at it.

"So, Randall," he said pleasantly. "You accuse me of having a medieval mind. That is the only statement in your sophistical attack that I can accept. In fact, I propose to demonstrate its accuracy right now, much to your disadvantage.

And speaking in a low, carefully modulated voice, he made the necessary incantation.

When the last ringing words had been pronounced, Craig relaxed visibly, and humming went to the bathroom, where he found a fever thermometer. He brought the instrument to the table, placing it first at the figure's base, then, with a frown, erect against the cardboard. He thought the arrangement amusing, and smiled faintly.

"Like a walking stick, almost," he mused aloud. "Ph.D. with glass walking stick—how very avant-garde! What would my unknown necromancer say to that, I wonder."

There was a heat lamp on the sideboard. He carried it over to the table, put in the plug, and directed the burnished copper reflector towards the puppet. When, in five minutes, a reading of the thermometer showed 103 degrees, he moved the model back several inches, replacing the instrument after shaking it down. The temperature quickly dropped to 100; he split the difference, advancing the cardboard likeness halfway to its first position. Finally the mercury column stood fast at 102.4. Dr. Craig nodded approval, and sat down with the "Commentaries," savoring the spicy gossip of the Venetian.

Half an hour later he went to the phone. "Hello," he said in jovial tones. "Joan? This is Irwin—Irwin Craig. No, I don't blame you for not remembering my voice; we've been out of touch rather long. I wanted a few words with Walter. What?

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Taken suddenly ill—why that's dreadful. I know what you're thinking; we've had our—ah—scholarly differences, but there are too few good medievalists like your husband—really; that's quite a fever, 102.4 You've an accurate thermometer, I see. Oh, nothing. Just give Walter my regards, and I'll call again later to see how he is." He replaced the handset, and sat there for several seconds, his eyes bright.

Then he smacked his left palm with his right fist.

"By Heaven!" he said softly. "By Heaven—it works! The damn thing really works—and in 1961!"

For two more hours, as the little image baked, he sat there, deep in megalomaniac daydreams. The clock ticked solemnly; the big volume lay closed on his lap. At length he put the book aside, snapped off the heat lamp, and sighed.

"Randall," he said, "your fever is going, going—gone! Dear Joan will be so happy; there is mercy in the universe after all." Smiling unpleasantly, he shook down the termometer and put it away.

"Now," he breathed, "what's next for our distinguished scholar?" With a bland, serpahic expression on his face, he reached into the messy kitchen cupboard, bringing out a large wire strainer. This he inverted over the figurine, so that it looked pathetically like a caged Lilliputian. "I wonder," he remarked, "if this gives him a trapped feeling to begin with. Probably not, but in these matters who can say? Just think of the lines of research—bah, I'm free of all that now."

He went to the refrigerator, and returned with a single ice-cube, which he placed on top of the strainer, directly over the thin, cardboard form. The beautiful simplicity of the arrangement obviously pleased him; he chuckled softly, watching.

A single drop of icy water, gleaming in the late afternoon sun, splashed on the tiny, defenseless head. It was followed soon by others, coming faster and faster. A miniature pool of chilly water formed at the figurine's feet.

"Most refreshing for him, just after fever," Craig laughed, heading for the phone.

"Hello," he said gravely, his voice full of concern. "Yes, Irwin again, Chills? And cold sweat? Isn't that rather unusual? What sort of illness—? Doesn't know, eh. A doctor ought to have some idea. Over in a few days—yes, if it *is* a virus. How long does it take an ice-cube to melt? Many minutes—more than you'd think; but not days. Sorry, I

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was thinking of something else. I'll check back later; I'm quite worried about him. No, really I am. Goodbye."

When the ice-cube had vanished, Craig eyed the model thoughtfully, then placed it flat upon the table, face up. Reaching into his pocket, he took out a handful of change, and separated the cents from the other coins. There were fifteen. With his thick but facile fingers he picked up a single penny and set it neatly on the center of the puppet's chest. Then he sat down, his gaze on the clock.

After five minutes, he put a second coin directly on top of the first. "Ironical," he said. "The damn fool's never cared a hang what they paid him; lives just for those researches of his." Craig's lips narrowed. "Well, these few pennies will weigh on him, all right."

Thirty-five minutes later, when there was a column of eight coins crushing the small chest, he made a final call.

"Is that a fact?" he exclaimed. "Can't seem to breathe, but no lung congestion. An oxygen tent; very wise. It must be something like a—ah—weight on his chest, I should think. Just a lucky guess; I know nothing about medicine. Oh yes, I quite understand you're too busy for me. Sorry you think I'm insincere, but I shan't trouble you again—by phone. Tell my poor colleague I'm thinking about him—thinking hard, I assure you. I've never heard you cry before, Joan. All right; goodbye."

As he hung up, there was a soft thump at the door. The evening paper had arrived. More from habit than because of any marked interest, he went out after it. Two patrol cars raced by, their sirens wailing, and Craig winced. Now that so much was within his grasp, he'd have to get away from this shabby, noisy neighborhood.

Back inside, he took a casual glance at the front page. There, clad in a revealing swim suit, a delectable young lady dominated the news. "Miss Universe—the Most Beautiful Girl in the World."

For a moment, as any man might, Dr. Craig studied the half-tone. It was unusually sharp for a newsprint photo, and surely a fine likeness. The instant that phrase entered his mind, the professor stiffened.

Craig had never been very successful with women. There was something in his cold, almost reptilian nature, with its undercurrent of cruelty, that repelled all but the most insensitive. When younger, he had courted a series of desireable girls, only to be rejected by each

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in turn. Finally, unwilling to risk his professional career by associating with more complaisant types, he had withdrawn into a solitary, brooding celibacy.

But now, with the teasing picture before his eyes, and the old manuscript's Latin about "unwilling lemans" whispering at the dark edge of his brain, Craig felt a sudden surge of resentful passion.

A re-examination of the parchment made it clear that bringing a reluctant woman to one's side was a somewhat more difficult matter than tormenting an enemy. It would take several hours; there was a ritual in addition to a mere incantation—a repulsive and debilitating one, involving the dismemberment of a cat. Nevertheless the game ought to be worth the candle, since the manuscript had already proved reliable.

To save time, he decided not to cut out and mount the picture. Very probably that was a needless preliminary. A likeness was just that, and not necessarily a puppet. If it didn't work, he could revert to the previous method.

Snatching the scissors, he quickly snipped out the large rectangle with the half-tone of Miss Universe. A hasty persusal of the paper showed that the nineteen year old co-ed from Georgia was staying at the Gaylord Hotel, some fifteen miles from his house. It was a little queer to note in the manuscript that time must be allowed for the woman to make the compulsive journey. In the Twelfth Century that meant a horse, or, in a few cases, some sort of coach. In these days, there was no reason why the girl couldn't quietly leave her room, take a cab, and be with Craig in less than an hour. Well and good. He braced himself for the ordeal ahead. First his neighbor's old tom-cat, dozing, no doubt, as usual, on top of the cellar door. . . .

It was after eleven at night when the professor finished the tiring ritual which preceded the incantation. But before completing the last step, he swept the coins from the figurine's chest.

"Don't want you to die—yet," he said. "I'll give you another dose tomorrow — if I have strength enough to get out of bed!" According to the parchment, the picture was sensitized for only three days, and before it became mere paper again, he'd see that Randall was thoroughly dead. Of course, if he died himself, the spell would end, but Craig had never felt better. . . .

Then he recited the sonorous Latin phrases, washed off the

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cat's blood, mixed himself a stiff martini, and went to bed. As a minor titillation, he pinned the newspaper picture of his intended victim against the wall just above his pillow, after which he stretched out in the warm darkness to wait, all a-tingle.

How would it be? The girl had to come; was bound to submit. Would she be conscious of the compulsion, and fight it? The manuscript implied she'd be hopelessly infatuated, acting according to her nature when in that state. It was an intriguing problem, but his thoughts returned to Randall. What was the best way to finish him off? He dwelled with pleasure on certain peculiarly medieval tortures; so few people understood just what it meant to be drawn and quartered, for example. Much more horrible than they dreamed. . . .

The old walls creaked as the damp, cool night air bathed them, and he scowled, thinking of his losing battle with the termites. Termites! Slowly a feral smile curled his lips. The puppet was made of paper and cardboard. What if—just suppose—he thrust it deep into the powdered wood and other debris of insects? What symptoms then, when hundreds of tiny jaws began gnawing? The very thing; he'd do it in the morning. Maybe with Miss Universe at his side. A first stage before (he hesitated to dare the thought) the world.

At that moment he heard the front door, deliberately left unlocked, open, and tensed under the cover as a thrill of exultation shook him. A surprisingly quick trip. Perhaps she'd had her own car handy. He hoped she wouldn't have a chauffeur waiting outside; it might be awkward. Not that he cared a damn about her reputation. Why should he, now that he was master of the world in terms of its leaders.

There was the sound of footsteps down the long, dark corridor — uncertain, heavy ones. Craig felt uneasy. Surely no slender young girl would walk like that. Filled with vague fears, he fumbled for the light switch on the wall above his pillow. As it clicked on, the pin-up, brushed by his fingers, fluttered to the blanket, face down. There, on the back, he saw a bestial, pitiably uncomprehending face, and underneath, the caption:

MAD STRANGLER AT LARGE!

Must Kill Where He Loves, Says Psychiatrist.

Still bewildered, Craig turned the clipping mechanically from one side to the other: Mad Strangler to Miss Universe. Abruptly there flashed into his

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mind the recollection of those police cars careening by some hours earlier. It dawned on him now with terrible finality that the killer must have been hiding relatively near, while the girl's hotel was miles away. In sensitizing one side, he had unwittingly done so to the other side.

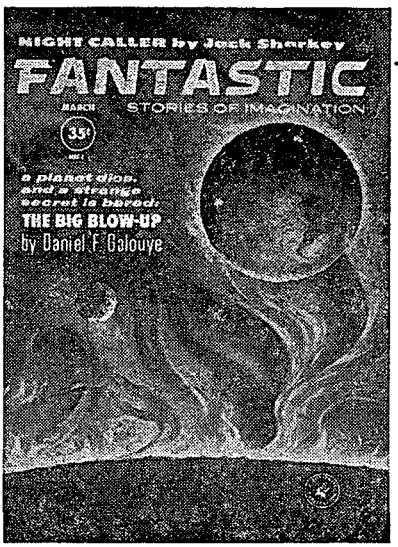
Then the bedroom door slammed open, and Craig's first leman, his animal face stubbled, his eyes wild, shambled in with outstretched arms.

The madman was drooling with possessive love.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Two of your favorite writers headline the March issue of FANTASTIC Stories of Imagination.



Jack Sharkey offers one of his weird-humor-fantasy creations, *Night Caller.*

And **Daniel Galouye** returns with *The Big Blow-Up,* a superb tale of a scientific expedition to a planet circling a sun about to go nova—and the strange secret of the imperturbable people who live there. Another magnificent Schomburg cover (1.) illustrates this story.

The March FANTASTIC will also bring you the second instalment of Keith Laumer's three-part *Worlds of the Imperium*, as well as short stories and all the usual features. Reserve your copy of the March *Fantastic* at your newsdealer's now. It will be on sale there February 21.

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What with creech preserves and electric zithers and other assorted oddments the faculty group didn't exactly lead dull lives. But things perked up considerably with the arrival of the . . . .

Visiting Professor

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

Illustrator DOUGLAS

THERE'S a new twenty-second century man coming in tomorrow," my husband said through a mouthful of dried Martian furz. "God! Do we have to have this damn furz for breakfast *every* day?"

"Furz is the *only* food that provides everything you need for nutrition. *Everything.* Scientists say you could live entirely on furz and be perfectly healthy. Healthier, as a matter of fact. For only ten credits a year. And you get all that food value with only two hundred calories a meal. Think of it!"

"I'll be damned if I'll think of it. I get paid to think about Domestic Architecture from 1875 to 1890, not about Martian furz."

"*Paid!* Is that what you call that flimsy, half-starved credit guarantee the University sends you every month? If we ever have a baby we'll have to live on furz three times a day."

"Baby!" William paled, pushed away his bowl of furz and lighted a cigarette. "I just bought you an electric zither. What do you want with a . . ."

"Never mind," I said darkly, "Just be glad your daddy didn't buy your mama an electric zither."

"Now what do you mean by that?" William snapped, because he is always the one to start arguments. "You always say something obscure when I'm hungry and it activates my digestive juices. That's how ulcers

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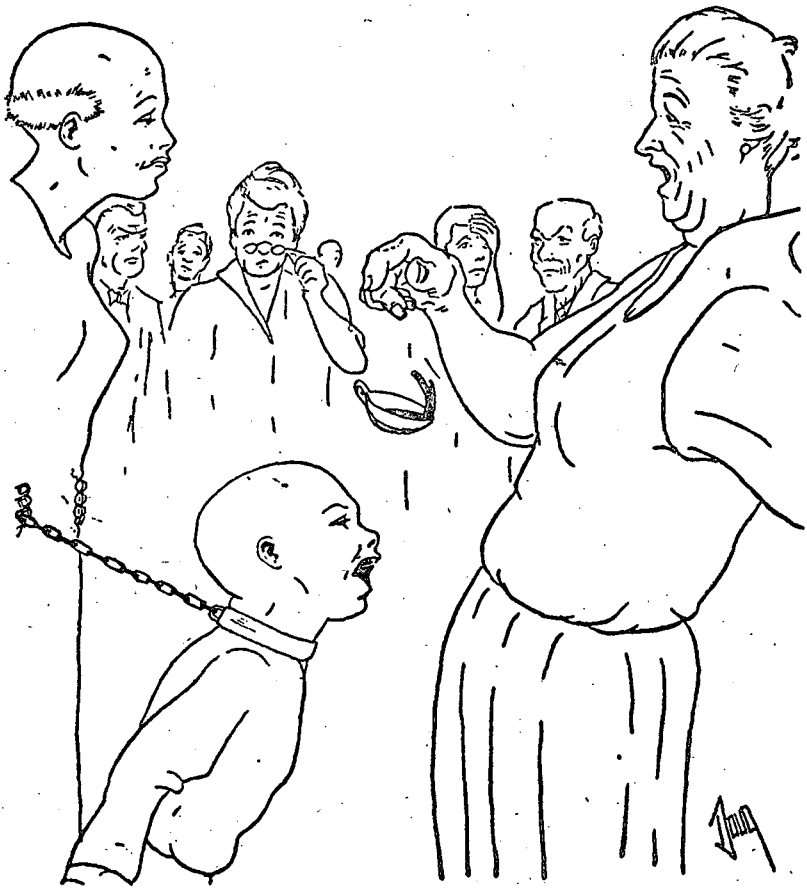
get started. The hydrochloric acid or whatever it is starts digesting the stomach."

"That's ridiculous! In the first place I wasn't talking to your digestive juices. And in the second place you've just had a nice, big bowl of furz."

"It *wasn't* nice. It leaves you feeling guilty because you want to eat something else and you know you don't need to. And when you feel guilty your large intestine contracts and that leads to . . ."

"William, I *won't* be made responsible for your digestive tract. The doctor said you were in perfect health and marriage has done wonders for you."



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William grinned. "I like you, anyway, furz and all." He reached for his lecture notes and stood up to leave.

"*Love* me, William," I reminded him. "Understatement is all very effective when you're lecturing on nineteenth-century history. But not when you're making love to your wife."

"I don't have time to make love to you," William said, glancing at the chronometer set in his thumbnail. "I have an eight o'clock class."

"That isn't what I meant. Oh, William, you're absolutely impossible. But go ahead and ask him to dinner tomorrow night."

"Who?" William asked, kissing me goodbye.

"The twenty-second century man, you idiot. You were going to ask me to have him to dinner before you got off on the furz."

"Oh, yes. Fine." William jumped on the conveyer belt that led to the Faculty Building.

"Tell him six o'clock!" I shouted.

"Right. Six o'clock."

"Is he married?" I screamed for William was going off fast.

"Either that or living in sin!" William screamed back at me.

Which is why there was always a delightful suspicion attached to the Jrobs. Four square blocks of Ivy Leave faculty heard William's quip.

Five minutes later dear old Mrs. Blake, Mrs. Romantic Poetry Blake, came dithering over bearing a jar of those dreadful creech preserves you were too polite to throw away.

"I thought you might like a jar of my creech preserves," she said with dignity. Then she threw restraint to the winds. "*Who's* living in sin, my dear? Isn't it fascinating?"

"The Jrobs," I answered thoughtlessly, because my mind was full of other things. Thank God he was married. That meant I could have a soufflé. Bachelors are too undependable for soufflés and timbales aren't nearly as impressive. Venusian grilch cheese soufflé with a soupçon of saffron. Green peas. Popped potatoes. But were the Teenie vacuums dependable? The last batch didn't pop right and I'd have to go all the way into town to get Acme Frozen Vacuums and even so . . .

Mrs. Blake's conversation was beginning to create static in my train of thought.

"Quite like Percy Bysshe and Mary," she was rattling on. "Or even George Gordon, Lord B. Though I must say I think Byron was something of a cad. I mean about the little girl in the convent. Though if you can write such lovely poetry and you look like Manfred . . . Does Mr. Jrob look like Manfred?"

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"Manfred?" I asked, frowning. I didn't like the gist of the conversation at all.

"My dear, I didn't mean to be superior. You're late nineteenth century architecture, so of course you wouldn't know. Manfred. Dark, gloomy, handsome, romantic."

"What about Manfred?" I asked, deciding we couldn't have cheese for dessert if we were having cheese soufflé for the entrée.

"Mr. Jrob. The one that's living in sin. Does he look like Manfred?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Jrob aren't living in sin," I answered, horrified. "He's coming in from the twenty-second century to occupy the Future chair at the University."

"But you *said* they were living in sin," Mrs. Blake insisted, working her eyebrows.

"My husband was just having his little joke. I'm sure they're perfectly respectable people and after all they'll be friends of ours."

"Of course," Mrs. Blake said, smiling with delight. "We must take up for our friends, musn't we? And now I've got to fly. I promised a jar of creech preserves to Norma. She's just out of the hospital, poor thing, and I've always said there's nothing like creech preserves for a hysterectomy."

Had the Jrobs been different, I might have gone about the neighborhood clearing up after Mrs. Blake's rumor. As it was, I maintained an enigmatic smile practically during the entire stay of the Jrobs at Ivy Leave. And I must say, I don't envy the Cheshire cat. Because it's a strain on the facial muscles.

But the Jrobs deserved everything they got. More, in fact, but tempers tend to get flabby in an intellectual atmosphere.

The Jrobs were in the midst of an argument as they arrived at our modest inflated bubble.

"Ivy *Leave!*" she was sputtering. "I thought you said Ivy *League.*"

"Now, now, Beta. Remember this is mid twenty-first century, not mid-twentieth century. Don't you ever read anything? Ivy Leave is . . ."

"Come on in," William said heartily, before they had a chance to toe the button.

I took both index fingers and pulled my mouth into a smile. How dare she use such a nasty tone about Ivy Leave? Before she even saw a pay check.

"How quaint!" Mrs. Jrob remarked when she was in the door. "Amazing what you've done with that old claka crate."

"I don't know what a crate is," I said, "But that's our new Young Professional Pined Finish Family Cabinet."

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"Notice her middle low coastal accent, Beta," Mr. Jrob said, extending a hand that might easily have held a peanut. "It's charming, isn't it?"

"It has a hairy sort of charm," Mrs. Jrob agreed nastily. I soon discovered that "hairy" was their general word of abuse. It was easy to see why. Both the Jrobs were completely hairless, except for an obviously dyed blond fringe around Mrs. Jrob's dome.

"Mash yourself up a hunk of furniture," I said much more cheerfully than I felt, "and make yourselves at home. What would you like to drink, Mrs. Jrob?"

"Mead?" she asked. It was obviously an unusual physical effort for her to shape her chair.

"Beta!" Mr. Jrob said reprovingly. "Mid-twentieth century America, remember? Try to seem like a part of the native atmosphere."

"Porter? Claret cup? Grog?"

Mr. Jrob cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Martini," he said. "We would be delighted to have a martini."

"What's a martini?" I asked. "I'd be glad to make it if . . ."

William laughed. "Nice try, J. Only you're a little off your century too. The latest respectable drink is a Suspicion."

"Fine! Fine!" Mr. Jrob said. He was never quite as offensive as his wife.

"What's in a Suspicion," she asked nervously. "I remember the time you came back from a field trip with a canteen full of kumiss. I've got my capillaries to think of, you know."

"Dear, I got that from Marco Polo."

"I don't care if you got it from Willy Mays. It did something to my capillaries."

"The Suspicion," William said, "is pretty harmless. It's straight French Vermouth with just a suspicion of gin in it and a clove of garlic. Some people put a sprinkling of nutmeg on the top, or a little . . ." He stopped, because of the expression on Mrs. Jrob's face. "You don't *have* to have the nutmeg."

"Hideous," Mrs. Jrob shuddered. "Absolutely hairy."

"Beta!"

"Oh, all right. But just give me a plain Vermouth."

William went back to make the drinks and left me unprotected.

"Have you found a place to live yet?" I asked Mrs. Jrob conversationally.

"We *brought* a place to live. Fortunately," she added, looking around my living room which is really, quite nice.

"A bubble?"

"Of course not. Synthetic slabs supported by electronic beams. They wouldn't let me bring my robot, of course, and

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there won't be enough power for my matter converter, so there'll be a lot of wastage. But I suppose you get used to primitive conditions after a while."

"You're so brave," I murmured. "Where are you going to put your house?"

"Hasn't your husband told you? He offered us your back yard. From his description it ought to just fit."

"Just fit!" On my peonies.

I asked William to take a look at the soufflé. If I'd looked at it it would have fallen.

After dinner we played some primitive middle low American music on the tape recorder and I was just feeling vengeful enough to bring out my electric zither when the footbell tinkled.

Mrs. Blake fluttered in, wearing her second best grey voile peplum and a surprised smile.

"Oh, ex*cuse* me, my dear, I had no *idea* you had company. Dr. Blake has a class tonight, you know, and I just thought I'd pop over to tell you about Norma's hys . . . oh, my, men present. My dear, they took everything out. *Everything.* Well, I'll just run . . ."

"No, indeed," I assured her. "Do sit down and talk. The men don't pay any attention to us anyway." I waved toward the company. "Meet Mr. and Mrs. Jrob from the twenty-second century."

Mrs. Blake peered nearsightedly at Mr. Jrob, donned her antique pince-nez, and took it off with a very disappointed expression.

"Tell me, Mr. Jrob, do you write poetry?"

I couldn't help it. I giggled.

"Poetry?"

"You know. 'The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece, where burning Sappho loved and sung . . .' That sort of thing."

"I *most certainly do not.*"

"What a hairy thought," Mrs. Jrob sniffed. "'The aisles of grease.' It reminds me of your faculty lunch room."

"Well, I just thought, in the circumstances . . . I mean, from what William suggested . . . oh, well, everyone can't write poetry," Mrs. Blake explained lamely.

The men went back to their deep discussion of late twentieth-century advertizing semantics, which left Mrs. Blake a clear field on Norma's hysterectomy.

"Hairiest thing I ever heard of," was Mrs. Jrob's comment.

Mrs. Blake left early, apologizing herself out of the door. But she whispered in my ear before she left, "Manfred, *indeed!*"

At first, Mr. and Mrs. Jrob were the center of much delighted attention. Mostly Mrs. Jrob, because she was home all day. For blocks around wives homed

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in on what came to be referred to as "the love nest." Mrs. Jrob was given to understand that at Ivy Leave faculty wives were Broadminded. Uninhibited. Not concerned with the unimportant Legal Technicalities of social existence. Godwin was mentioned frequently. Rousseau. Françoise Sagan.

But Mrs. Blake's rumor, for which I am in no way responsible, soon bore bitter fruit. Creech, I should say.

It was William who, by pure chance, mentioned. He's given to mentioning things when faced with a bowl of furz in the morning. Which is one good reason for serving furz.

"Too bad about Jrob," he said.

"What's too bad?"

"Nobody can take over his classes."

"You mean they're leaving?" I cried delightedly, wondering if the peonies would grow up again from the roots.

"May have to. It seems they've been living in sin."

"Oh, but that's just a rumor Mrs. Blake started. Anyway, so what? It's perked up the whole neighborhood."

"It perked up the board of administrators, too. It seems word got down to the undergraduate level. That's why J.'s classes were so large. He lectures like a billy goat. And one of those undergraduates is a pasty-faced little freshman who just happens to be old B.D.'s grandson. So word got back to B.D. and President Grayson said he had that expression on his face he gets when he's decided to leave his money to Harvard."

"Harvard! But all there is there is . . ."

"I know. But you know the tradition. Businessmen think there is an exclusive section of the Hereafter reserved for people who leave their money to Harvard."

"Let's not discuss B.D. Get back to Jrob. What did President Grayson tell him?"

"As I get the story, Jrob says to the Pres, 'What do you mean, *legally* married?' And it turns out he really is living in sin, only it isn't a sin in the twenty-second century and furthermore he refuses to *get* married as he says that would make him lose face and ruin his social life when he goes back home on vacations."

"So he's going to be fired?"

"Asked to resign because of cultural lag."

"My, but this is going to be fun!" I sighed happily. Because William knows all about Architecture from 1875 to 1890, but I know all about college professors. And I knew the upheaval to come would furnish conversational material for years.

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The sociology department was up in arms immediately. It was the first Cause we'd had since Integration. Professor Insfree grew a beard and two female teaching fellows shaved their heads.

The psychology department followed. Musty old tomes, predating the Organization Man and the growth of suburban morality, were routed out of the basement in the library. The *libido* came into its own again.

"We're lost. We're all lost," several members of the English Department were heard to remark with tragic joy. Fitzgerald and Hemingway enjoyed a brief revival.

The Jrob dilemma sifted down to the student level. A group of sophomores began to wear brown chitons and glare at everybody. *Blast,* the student organ of Ivy Leave, began to publish articles advocating free thought, though apparently the only thing students considered worth thinking about freely were other students of the opposite sex.

Above all, the roar "Academic Freedom!" echoed from one end of the campus to another.

There was even a pantie raid interpreted, for some obscure reason, as a gesture for academic freedom.

Bulletins began to appear on the campus. As fast as the signs were torn down they came back up.

"All the world loves a lover except the Administration."

"Were Pericles and Aspasia married?"

"Don't let them make you do it, Professor Jrob!"

"Up with academic freedom."

"Down with the administration."

It was gratifying, I thought, the way faculty and students alike rallied around the injured Jrobs. I didn't like them, but it occurred to me I could do a little rallying myself and I popped in to see Mrs. Jrob one morning to offer aid and encouragement.

"They won't *dare* fire your . . . er . . . Mr. Jrob now," I told her. The entire faculty would resign in protest. They might even go back to Harvard."

"Lord! I'll be glad to get out of this hairy place," was her only comment.

It was for the principle of the thing, not for Mrs. Jrob, that I marched through the History Building with the other wives, bearing my placard. "The Faculty Wives Accept Mrs. Jrob."

Thus Mrs. Jrob managed to be a tremendous social success, though she refused to join the Garden Club or the Sewing Club and her only comment on the Wives Tea, which was compulsory, was "Hairy."

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Though all did not end well, because of certain unexpected events, President Grayson was shouted down and the Jrobs were asked to stay. President Grayson made one last stand. He came into his office one morning and through his window zinged a dagger with a note attached. It bit into the wall and quivered. President Grayson summoned the maintenance department without a moment's hesitation and the note was removed. It read, "What does Ivy Leave stand for, anyway?"

For some reason this epistle enraged President Grayson beyond endurance. He called a meeting of the entire student body and faculty. The wives, janitors and assorted news reporters came too.

"This note!" he cried waving it in the air, "sent anonymously, reads, 'What does Ivy Leave stand for, anyway?' Well, I can tell you one thing it does *not* stand for. Free Love!"

"Boo. Hiss."

President Grayson was not making the impression he intended. He couldn't understand why the issue was not as clear to everyone else as it was to him.

"All right," he said, several times because there was a group singing, for no apparent reason, "La Marseillaise." "All right. Even the freshmen here are not children. I'll put it to you in its crudest terms. Do you want your University to stand for fornication?"

There was a shocked silence.

"Well, do you?"

The shouting began.

"Yes!" from the sophomores.

"No!" from the seniors.

"Define your terms!" from the faculty.

"Allons, enfants de la patrie . . ." from an assorted group.

In the end, of course, he lost. Well, not in the *end*.

It was at the Insfree's cocktail party that the turning point came. We had a jolly time that fall, because of the prevalent notion that a party for the Jrobs was a declaration for academic freedom. The Jrobs, unfortunately, did not like to go out to parties because Mrs. Jrob felt other people's houses weren't properly filtered, and she had her lungs to consider.

They appeared, however, at the Insfrees. And to everyone's consternation they were accompanied by a bald headed little boy of about ten. The little boy bore an evil grin and he kept glancing slyly at Mrs. Jrob. There was a heavy collar around his neck and Mrs. Jrob held the rope firmly, for he had a tendency to buck.

"Not broken in yet," I heard her explain as she passed her hostess, taking the sanitary pre-

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caution of not shaking the extended hand.

Mrs. Blake was all shook up. "Mr. Jrob," she said, or rather asked, "I didn't know you had a child!"

"That's not my child," Mr. Jrob answered, as though the thought were, indeed, a hairy one. "I don't even know his name."

"Omicron," Mrs. Jrob said. "I've told you a thousand times."

"Poor, dear child," Mrs. Blake murmured, stooping to commiserate with him.

"Watch out!" Mrs. Jrob shouted. Too late.

"He's used to robots," Mr. Jrob explained. "I suppose he doesn't understand yet that it's all right to bite robots but it's not all right to bite people. Why *I* should be saddled with this child I don't know."

"It certainly isn't *my* fault," Mrs. Jrob said petulantly, smoothing her blond fringe with a shapeless hand. "How he got out of the Personality Adjustment Center I don't know. Much less how he got here. I'm going to sue them for negligence. I sent them the boy and they were supposed to return me the man. If *this* is the man—well, all I can say it, he takes after his daddy."

"No wonder he bites," said Professor Graham, of psychology. "All that pent up hostility. You mean you actually put him in an institution for the duration of the academic year?"

"No, indeed," Mrs. Jrob replied. "He's been in it since he was six. Before that he was in the Tot's Pleasure Dome. I know my responsibilities. Ordinarily he's perfectly happy there and I bore him to tears. I don't know what got into him."

"You mean he's never known what a home is?"

"Not *my* home. What kind of a home do you think it would be with a child around? I take him out to the zoo on Sunday afternoons."

"Poor little thing." Mrs. Blake was practically sobbing. "Why don't you let me take him home with me. Just this evening. So he can get to bed at a reasonable hour. And find out what a *real* home is like." Considering her mangled wrist, Mrs. Blake was the heroine of the evening.

Mrs. Jrob handed Mrs. Blake the end of the rope. "Go ahead. It's *your* home."

As Professor Graham remarked to me, despite his recent article, *Libido Revisited*, there's something a little sordid about it. The libido is all very well, but not with a *child* around."

Dr. Blake was similarly incensed. "He doesn't even write poetry. Now that I think about it, what excuse *does* he have?"

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Professor Insfree retired to the back of the house and returned with his beard shaved off. It was a symbol to all of us.

Omicron was back in no time. He rushed in panting, his eyes wild, and handed the end of the rope to his mother. "Get me out of this hairy century," he screamed.

"What happened?" Mrs. Jrob asked.

"She tried to poison me!" Omicron grabbed at his throat dramatically. "I can still taste it. The old hag shoved poison in my mouth."

"Creech preserves," I guessed brilliantly. "They're perfectly harmless, Mrs. Jrob. They may taste a little odd to your son." As a matter of fact, they taste a little odd to everyone.

"Mrs. Blake let you come back here alone? Nobody held your rope?"

"*Held* it? She tried to take my collar off." Omicron shuddered. "Threatened my entire sense of security. And would the other kids get a laugh out of it if I showed up without my collar. What would I have to take off at graduation? I had to freeze her."

Professor Blake fixed Omicron with a furious gaze. "What have you done to my wife, you unnatural child?"

"*Give* me that Freeze Gun," Mrs. Jrob said with tight lips.

"Aw, Mama . . ."

"*Give* it to me or I'll leave you here."

"Aw . . ." He handed it over.

"The question is," Professor Blake blazed, "*what* did he do to my wife?"

"Froze her."

"Is she . . . is she . . .?" He had a horrible thought.

"Not literally. You people are so hairy. She'll be immobilized for twenty-four hours."

"I'll sue," Professor Blake shouted as he stormed out.

"You needn't bother. We won't be here. I'm taking Omicron back."

"Not a bad idea," several people remarked.

And so, in the end, Mr. Jrob resigned from the Future Chair because of cultural lag, and everybody was reasonably happy.

Except me. Because I found something out just as the Jrobs were leaving.

"Well, I guess I won't be seeing you again," I remarked happily as they stood on their pile of synthetic boards waiting for Translation.

"Not exactly," Mrs. Jrob answered.

"What do you mean, not exactly?"

"You died when I was a baby, Grandma."

Which is why I am so interested in the electric zither.

THE END

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Take: one pair knitting needles, one Norn's niece (well-stacked), one sorcerer, one childish rhyme, and on stalled elevator. The result, an out-of-this-world wingding called, for reasons which will shortly become apparent . . .

A THREAD in TIME

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator DOUGLAS

HIGH on a windswept cliff, overlooking a strangely flat, motionless sea, there stands a house. In that house, the rooms are furnished as most rooms are, with cabinets in the kitchen, TV in the parlor, bureaus in the bedroom, and so forth. As houses go, it is quite ordinary, except for one striking fact. It has no doors or windows. Even inside the house, there are no doors between the various rooms. People passing by this house might think it looked quite odd, what with smooth featureless walls rising from the foundation to the roof, and a porch that leads to a blank wooden face of one side. Except, of course, people don't pass by any more. There are none left.

Oh, also in one of those doorless rooms, there is a table, on which rest a number of unusual objects, and before that table is an armchair, with a man's trousers lying partly on the seat, the legs dangling over the front above a pair of empty shoes and socks, and also a man's shirt, fallen into a huddle atop the

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trousers, the necktie still fastened about the collar. The entire tableau gives the impression of a man having vanished right out of his garments. Which is precisely what happened. On the rug beside the chair lie a woman's dress, stockings, shoes and bracelet, with just a hint of pink lingerie peeking out from within the various articles of clothing. This tableau gives the impression of a young woman having vanished right out of her garments. Which is precisely what *didn't* happen.

That's the way things stand, now, on August the 18th, 1995. The planet is depopulated, the ocean heaves its monstrous bulk no more, and that queer house stands high on that windswept precipice. However, on August the *17*, 1995, things were still as they'd always been . . .

"My name is Raymond Leonard Lewis," I said to the pretty girl with the wide brown eyes. We were not acquainted previously, as you can see, but when

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you are trapped in a self-service elevator with another person, you have to say something. So I gave her my name, and my best smile.

She looked at me, gave a modified smile of her own, and said, coolly, "How do you do?" Then she turned away again, tapping her small foot in impatience with the delay.

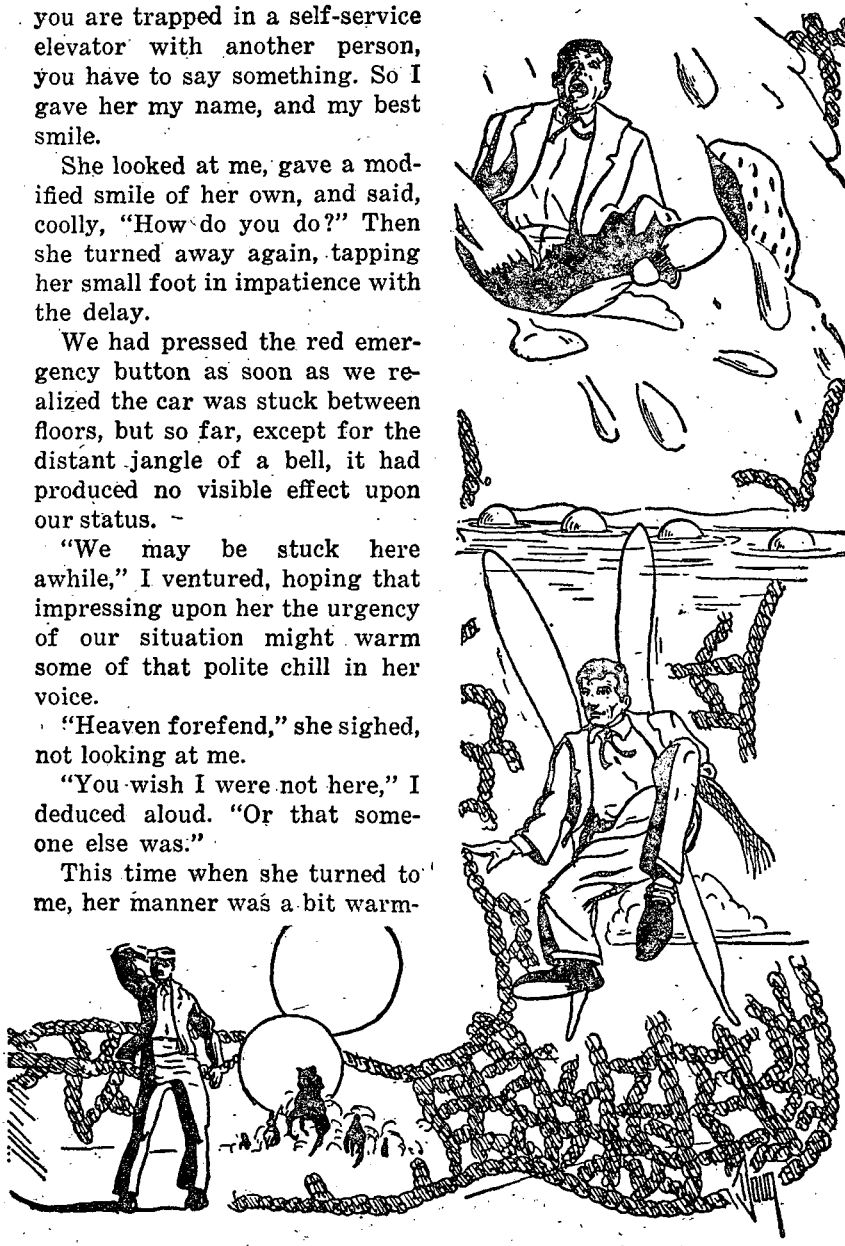
We had pressed the red emergency button as soon as we realized the car was stuck between floors, but so far, except for the distant jangle of a bell, it had produced no visible effect upon our status.

"We may be stuck here awhile," I ventured, hoping that impressing upon her the urgency of our situation might warm some of that polite chill in her voice.

"Heaven forefend," she sighed, not looking at me.

"You wish I were not here," I deduced aloud. "Or that someone else was."

This time when she turned to me, her manner was a bit warm-



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er, even apologetic. "I'm sorry if I was curt," she said softly, "but I am in an awful hurry, and this delay is terribly annoying. Can't you do something?"

"The wall of this car has a panel which can be removed by turning the three retaining screws," I said. "Do you have a dime?" She gave me a startled look, so I hastened to say, "I'm not *charging* for my gallantry, lady. I mean you need a dime, or something that size, to insert into the slot of the screwheads. They're in too tight for inserting one's fingernails."

"Where does the panel lead?" she asked, her eyes big, gold-flecked brown, and worried. "Not into the *shaft?*"

"These shafts have ladders, of sorts, built into the corners," I said. "We can climb to the next level and open the door to the floor."

Her eyes flickered up to the green light of the floor-indicator. "We're between the tenth and eleventh floors—" she said. "I couldn't do it." She shivered.

"Well, I tried," I said. There was another lapse in the conversation, and then she smiled, less hesitantly.

"I'm Carol Ellers," she said, suddenly, as though to expell the words before she could call them back. As soon as they were spoken, she appeared sorry she'd said them.

"Don't worry," I said, *"I'll* never tell."

She laughed, then, and shook her head. Then the silliness of our situation seemed to recur to her, and she thumped lightly, but irritably, upon the wall with the side of her fist. "Oh, *why* did this have to *happen!"* she exclaimed.

"Do you really want to know?" I said, earnestly. My manner must have been convincing, for she turned to me and spoke with a hint of apprehension in her tone.

"You sound as if you *knew*—"

"Oh, I do," I assured her. Then, "Not the exact mechanical reasons, of course, but the reasons for the happening itself."

She didn't go *eek* and edge away from me, but she gave a decided impression of holding back those very reactions. "What are you talking about?" she asked, as if in dread I would answer.

"Fate," I said. "Chance, luck, whatever you want to call it." Before I could explain further, that coolness was back in her demeanor, and she wasn't edgy any more.

"Don't tell me," she muttered. "You and I were fated for one another, I suppose, and this is Mother Nature's way of bringing us together!" The scorn in her words bit into me like vitriol.

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"Don't flatter yourself," I said, pleased to note the flush that sprang to her cheek at my words. "I happen to be a metaphysical scientist, and I was about to describe the precise reasons why this, or any elevator or machine, sometimes ceases to function, apart from mechanics."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "I'm sorry."

"Would you like to sit on the floor?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"I mean, why don't we sit down? The surface looks passably clean, and this standing up is getting uncomfortable." I squatted down on my haunches as I spoke, but she remained upright.

"You are wearing a charcoal grey suit," she remarked. "But I am wearing a light cotton skirt. No thank you."

From my vantage point, I said, with interest, "You are also wearing a pair of delightfully shapely legs."

After a fractional hesitation, Carol Ellers suddenly squatted down beside me. "How dare you!" she said.

"If you didn't want men to look at your legs, you'd wear that skirt down to your ankles," I said, logically. She didn't answer. I went on. "Uh— You work in this building?" Silence, cold and angry. "You—uh—you got on at fourteen . . . Let me see . . . You are coming, then, from either Abercrombie and Fitch, the Thomas salon, or from that tuxedo rental outfit . . ." Her face was beginning to grow tight under my scrutiny. "You seem to have a healthy head of hair, so that lets out the Thomas Treatment— Or is that your *own* hair?" She flashed me a searing glance, then looked away. "You'd look silly in a tuxedo . . ." I pondered further. "So— But you don't look like the type who likes hunting."

"Please, Mr. Leonard—" she began, anxiously.

"Lewis," I said. "Leonard's the middle name. But you can call me Ray."

There was a sudden jolt, and the car started down, nearly knocking us flat on the floor. We stood up and began smoothing our clothes automatically, each still uneasily aware of the other's presence, and the short talk we'd had. My mind was racing over her being on the fourteenth floor. What could she have bought at A&F? I looked at the large white straw handbag she carried, and suddenly stopped wondering.

"Carol—" I said, dropping formality. "If there is a policeman in the lobby—" We descended past the fifth floor. "—are you going to sick him on me for mashing?"

She blinked, surprised at the

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thought. "Why— No," she said. "Why should I?"

For answer, I gripped her by the shoulders, leaned forward, and planted a swift kiss upon her shocked lips. We were slowing as we neared the main floor.

"*Now* will you call him?" I said, letting her go.

She stared at me, frightened, then said with hollow camaraderie, "It— It was only in fun, wasn't it?"

I narrowed my eyes, looked her up and down slowly, and then, just before the door opened, I said, "Hmmm . . . Then you *do* have a gun in your purse." She gasped.

The bright brass doors slid apart, and Carol darted out of the car, then hesitated, her bag clutched to her breast in both hands, looking left and right in panic. At the magazine stand there was a policeman looking over a lineup of paperback mysteries with salacious covers.

"You going to call him?" I said. "—or should I?"

"Oh, no, please," Carol blurted, her eyes looking up into mine. "I can explain . . . I mean, I *can't* explain, but there *is* an explanation . . . Ray—" She added the last word much as one adds a tenspot to a note you slip a headwaiter when you urgently need a table. It wasn't cordiality; it was cajolery.

However, she had gorgeous auburn hair, those big brown eyes, and a figure as alluring as a thousand-dollar bill, and I'm not made of cotton candy, so—

"There's a nice little bar down the street, where they make terrible martinis, but it's seclusive. Can I entice you?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I suppose so."

I'd had more enthusiasm accorded my overtures in the past, but I wasn't going to look a gift girl in the motivation. I took her arm, and we headed for the street.

"Now," I said, as soon as the waiter had withdrawn, leaving us in the cool shadows of a large leatherette booth with icy drinks glittering before us on the shiny black tabletop, "what's with this gun? You're certainly not going on a bear hunt?"

She looked at me, then took a large, delicate swallow of her drink before replying. "It's because—" She halted and made a sour face, staring at her drink.

"I told you they were terrible," I said. "Too much vermouth. But go on."

Catching her breath, she said, "I was going to kill a man. Of course, now I can't."

"Because *I* know?"

She nodded, wistfully.

I propped my face on one fist and stared at her, my head tilted

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to one side. "Well, now, don't jump to any conclusions. Tell me about the man. I may *approve* of your plan, after all."

Something like hope crept into her eyes, then faded.

"What's the use?" she sighed. "I have no way of *proving* what I say about him is true. And naturally, if I were given to lying, I'd try to make up a conceivable reason for his death, just to win you over to my side."

I thought this over. "Yes, Carol, that's true. But I might find out later that you'd lied, and—"

She shook her head. "Too late then. You'd be an accessory before the fact, and just as guilty as I."

She had something there. But I was too curious to holler for a cop. "Well, try me, and see," I said. "Tell me what whoever-it-is has done to make you want to shoot him down."

A rueful smile touched her mouth. "He stole my Aunt Barbara's knitting needles," she said.

I let my torso fall back against the leatherette with a dull thud, my ears still jumpy from her words. After a second, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, I said, "He stole your Aunt Barbara's knitting needles. So therefore he must die. Hmmm . . . Am I supposed to guess *why*?"

"You—you don't believe me," she sighed. "I didn't think you would. I suppose you'll call that policeman, now?"

I eyed her warily. "With a gun in your purse, and with the thing you just said, lady— Maybe I'd better call a *squad* of policemen, with a side-message to Bellevue."

"I'm not crazy," she asserted calmly. "It may sound like I am, but I'm not."

"That's *hopeful*," I said, with a little relief. "If you *know* it sounds nutty, you can't be *completely* cracked."

"I'm not," she said quietly. "If I were, I'd already have used the gun on *you*, instead of arguing."

This hadn't occurred to me, until that moment, and I received the news gratefully, if with a belated tingle of cold perspiration on my brow as I realized what I might have called down upon myself. "I'm glad . . ." I said feebly. "But it sure sounds *goofy*. What *about* these knitting needles? They made of platinum or something?"

She tossed her head impatiently, setting that auburn cascade sparkling in even the dim light where we sat. "No, they're made of bone, if it matters." I tried to think of a reply, and was failing miserably as she went on, "You see, this man—his name is Peter Stykes, by the way—is a . . ." She faltered, embarrassed to go on.

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"Say it," I urged. "I won't be shocked by bad language. I was in the infantry."

Her color deepened. "It's not a *bad* word, Mr. Lewis—"

"Ray. Please."

"—Ray, then. It's— It's an unlikely word."

I shrugged. "Surprise me."

"He's a sorcerer."

I was surprised. So much so that I picked up my drink and drained the glass, vermouth or no vermouth. I set the empty glass back upon the table, then said, "Like in the old fairytales? Pointed cap, grey beard, star-spattered robes, and so on?"

"Don't be silly," she said.

"Who, *me*?" I choked. "I'm the only one of us that makes any sense at all!"

"Peter Stykes," she said, with earnest deliberation, "*is* a sorcerer. He is also young, handsome, and wears only Brooks Brothers suits and Hathaway shirts. And he used to be my fiance."

"Used to be till when?" I asked, fascinated.

"Till I decided to shoot him, of course," she said. "There's little point in remaining engaged to a man who'll shortly be falling dead from your personal marksmanship."

"That makes sense," I said, reaching for the remains of Carol's drink and draining that glass, too. "Screwy, but vaguely logical."

"He doesn't love me," she said. "I thought he did, but it turned out that he was just using me, in order to have his chance to steal the knitting needles."

"And you have to get them home to Aunt Barbara before the old gal misses them and all hell breaks loose," I muttered.

"Then you do believe me!" she exclaimed happily.

I blinked stupidly at her across the table. "I thought I was making that up!"

"But that's it, exactly," she said, still elated. "So—now that you understand my reasons, you won't tell, will you?"

"Lady—" I choked. "Carol, honey, I not only do not yet *understand* your reasons, I don't even *know* them! There's more involved in this thing than recovering heirlooms."

"Who said they were heirlooms?" asked Carol.

"I did," I mumbled. "Guess I was wrong. What *is* the urgency of recovering these old bits of bone, then?"

"In the wrong hands, they can wreak terrible havoc," said Carol, reaching across the table and grabbing my thumb. I wiggled it, but she held tight. "Don't you see?"

I tried to, but couldn't. Maybe it was the martinis. "All I can figure," I said, confusedly, "is that Peter Stykes might drop a stitch, or something . . ."

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"Exactly," said Carol, releasing my thumb. "I knew you'd understand."

"If you imply that once more," I said sincerely, "I am going to lower my face to this tabletop and sob my heart out. I do *not* understand! Why should Peter Stykes' dropping of a stitch with stolen bone knitting needles of your Aunt Barbara's cause terrible havoc?"

Carol's hand went to her mouth, abruptly, then she burst into a peal of soft laughter. "Forgive me," she said. "I forgot the most important part. Aunt Barbara is a Norn. Remember the Nornir?"

A hazy recollection crossed my mind. "Aren't they the— That is, aren't they supposed to be the Fates, or something, living on a hill somewhere, with only one eye among them?"

Carol's smile was warm and friendly. "I *knew* you'd have heard of them."

I frowned, dizzied by the drinks. "I don't recall a *Barbara*, though . . ."

"Oh, Aunt Barb's always been publicity-shy," laughed Carol. "Her sisters, Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld liked the limelight; but Barbara didn't want her name batted about in the mythologies."

"Oh, I don't blame her for a moment," I slurred, trying to focus my left eye, through which the world was becoming a silvery blur. "Any woman would've done the same."

"She's always had it a little tough," Carol confided, leaning closer to me. "I mean, her sisters have the past, present and future sewn up—" She giggled, suddenly.

"I get it," I mumbled. "Sewn up. Their tapesh—tapesh—that thing they weave. Good joke."

"So, of course, that left my poor aunt with nothing to do but knit an event or two now and then," said Carol.

"Aw," I moaned, with foggy sympathy. "Poor kid . . ."

Carol nodded, twirling the glass I'd emptied by its fragile stem. "It keeps her happy, of course, but—Did you order doubles? I think these are doubles. —But all she ever manages to influence is probabilities. That's why I thought you might help."

"*What's* why you thought I might help?" I murmured, between barely movable lips, as my right eye caught up with my left in silvery dimness.

"You being a metaphysician, and all," she said, her voice coming at me hollowly, amid a growing whine of irritating pitch. "I figured you'd want to help out before Peter Stykes drops a stitch and louses up probabilities."

I stared at her through the

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roseate nimbus that mingled with the silver haze about her face, and said, carefully, "You're right." I nodded sagely, slowly.

"You want to help?" she queried. "Is that what you mean?"

"No, you're right, those were doubles," I yawned, my eyes distending slightly in an effort to keep the lids from sliding over them. Then, tardily, "Help? Help what?"

"Shoot Peter Stykes, of course," said Carol. "Do you?"

"Why— Why *not!*?" I said thickly, as the world went a shimmery rose-and-silver. "Serves'm right."

That's all I remember for awhile.

My next recollection is of the feeling of motion, and cold air upon my face, and I blinked furry eyes open to see a twining highway, through a clear blue-tinted windshield, rushing along toward me in the late afternoon sunlight. All about were rocky shoulders jutting vertically up to pine-clogged woods. The air was tingling fresh, and smelled deliciously of green things and resin.

I sat up from my erstwhile slouch, and looked at the driver of my conveyance. Carol, manipulating the wheel with careless grace, turned her head briefly and smiled, then looked back at the winding roadway before us. "Welcome back," she said, with sardonic humor.

"How long was I out?" I asked, shaking my head to jog the cobwebs loose. My brain rattled a little, then settled gingerly back where it belonged. "And where are we?"

"You were out for three hours, Ray, and we are on our way to Peter Stykes' house to get those needles back."

I sat up even straighter. "Say, isn't that a little dangerous? Him being a wizard, I mean."

"Oh, I know some protective chants," she laughed.

"You better slip me a few; all I know is 'tick-tock, double-lock'," I groaned, as my eyes slowly unfuzzed and began to see normally again.

"Mmm, that's a new one. What's it for?"

"Kid games," I explained, mildly surprised she didn't know. "When you're about to be tagged, or captured, it's the thing to shout to keep the opponent at bay. Signifies building up a barrier between you, I suppose."

Carol nodded thoughtfully. "You know, I *like* that . . . It's simple to learn, to the point, and has a pretty lilt to it."

"It's only a child's rhyme, for pete's sake," I said. "It doesn't really *do* anything."

"Didn't it stop you from being tagged?" she asked.

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"—well— Yes, of course, but —" I fumbled weakly. "The other kids were only playing the game."

"Are you sure?" asked Carol.

"Come to think of it—*No*," I had to admit, a little bewildered. Then another thought sidetracked this curious line of recollection, and I asked, "Look, if—and I *mean* 'if'—your aunt is a Norn, what does that make you?"

"A Norn's niece," she said. "Sometimes called a Norse."

"But that's a nationality," I protested.

"Are you sure?" she said. "Just a nationality, and nothing more?"

"At the moment, I'm not sure of anything," I admitted. "I'm not even sure what I'm doing on this trip; I don't really *believe* any of your story, you know . . ."

"Why not?" asked Carol, raising one eyebrow in puzzlement.

"Because it's crazy," I said in exasperation. "There's no such things as Norns and sorcerers, and—and—and if there *were*, you'd have to go after this Peter Stykes with something more potent than they sell at Abercrombie and Fitch!" I halted, as my curiosity got the better of my reason, then asked, "Just what kind of gun did you buy?"

Her shoulders shrugged lightly. "Just a gun. A nice light one, so it wouldn't be too heavy to tote. I think it's what they call size twenty-two."

"Caliber," I corrected, annoyed. "You don't say 'size' about guns. You say 'caliber'."

Carol turned a puzzled face to mine. "If caliber isn't size, what is it?"

I opened my mouth, left it that way awhile, and closed it, without saying a word. She had me. To keep from looking completely imbecilic, I hitched the topic up a notch. "What are you going to shoot him with, silver bullets?"

"Of course not, silly," she laughed. "That's for werewolves."

"May I ask what you *are* going to use?"

"Certainly," she smiled. "Jellybeans."

Jellybeans. Uh-huh. Yeah. "Uh — Carol— Mind if I ask how you intend to propel them through the barrel?" I asked it nonchalantly, but my left eye developed a tic.

"Powder," she said, amazed at my ignorance. "What else?" Before I could ask any more dumb questions, she opened her purse, beside her on the seat, and handed me a heap of colorful things that clicked and tinkled in my palm. "See?" she said.

I looked at the objects, hard. From the back to the middle, they were tiny .22 brass casings; the rest of the way forward, they were red, black, and green

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parabolas, of a uniform gloss. I licked one, tentatively. Licorice.

Slightly unnerved, I dropped the baubles back into her bag. "They *are* jellybeans," I said. "You know, I thought you were kidding . . ."

"What else *could* you use to kill a sorcerer?" she asked, in some mystification. "Aren't they *anti*-enough?"

"Anti-*what?*" I said, my voice a repressed scream between tightly clenched teeth.

"Anti-sorcerer," she said blithely. When I shook my head in numb stupefaction, she explained, "Well, you shoot people with lead, don't you, because it's a foreign body, and can't be tolerated by the system?"

"Well, more or less, sort of, yes, I guess," I said.

"Well, then, you have to kill a sorcerer with something alien to *his* system, like jellybeans."

"I have news for you. They're just as alien to mine."

Carol laughed. "Not in that way. Symbolically, Ray. You can't kill a sorcerer easily, you know. You have to use an abnormal weapon."

I glanced at the purse. "You got it."

"Abnormal to *him*, Ray, not to other weapons. See, a sorcerer is evil, bitter, dangerous and powerful. A jellybean is good, sweet, harmless and weak."

I shrugged. "So am I, for that matter."

Carol sighed happily and nodded. "That's another reason I'm glad you came."

I didn't like the implications in her answer. "Carol—Miss Ellers— I— I thought I was kind of coming along for the ride, is all . . ."

"You said you wanted to help," she reminded me. "Won't you? I mean, after you *promised?*"

"I must have been drunk," I protested.

"You were," she said, adding, with a smile of intolerable persuasion, "but I won't hold it against you . . ."

The sunset, as we passed a cleft in the rocky siding of that road, glinted coppery and golden in her thick, rich hair. "Why couldn't you have been bald!" I groaned, and gave in.

"Just what is it I'm supposed to do?" I asked, much later, as we climbed out of the car before the imposing home of Peter Stykes, sorcerer, etched in cold moonlight.

"Be," said Carol, her cool hands pressing one of mine between them. "Just *be*. That will be enough. You are so opposite to Peter, you'll surely foul his spells. Meantime," she added, matter-of-factly, "I'll shoot him down."

Together, we ascended the

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steps of the low wooden porch, and paused before the tall black door. It was a double door, and its shade of black was so dense as to make it difficult to look at, but the handle, knocker, and bell-plate were of mirror-polished silver. More than anything else, it looked to me like the lid of an upright coffin. Carol took hold of the knocker and rapped.

"Nobody home," I blurted, almost instantly.

There was a scuffling sound inside, a vague rustle of movement that immediately ceased. Carol rapped again. This time the door opened, with an easy silent swing back into the front hall. There was no one in sight.

"Come, Ray," said Carol, stepping across the threshhold. I followed after her, and the door closed behind us with a gentle snick of the latch. I was gazing around the long, narrow hallway in some trepidation, wincing at the things I saw, avoiding direct stares at the things I half-saw, and vainly trying to focus on some of the things I almost saw. For instance, there was one of those plaster death-masks of an old lady; trouble was, from the expression on her face, her death was caused by the plaster. There was something hanging from a rope at the dark terminus of the hall, something that swayed and hung with palpable heaviness in the gloom; I didn't

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want to see more of that. And then there were the walls, which looked fresh and white as I gazed directly at them, but out of the corner of my eye, they seemed to be running with fresh warm blood; each time I hazarded a sudden stare, though, they were white again.

Carol, however, paid no attention to the interior decoration, but strode forward valiantly, casting bold gazes right and left, looking, seeking . . . and finding.

"There!" she said, pointing triumphantly through an open doorway. I came abreast of her and peered in.

The room beyond that doorway was vast, vaster even than the house had looked from the exterior. It went far back, its floor plain sanded featureless boards, its ceiling old grey plaster, and its walls that same on-again-off-again crimson-dripping. There was not a stick of furniture in sight, anywhere. But at the very end—directly across from where we stood—almost lost in that immeasurable void—stood a man. He wore a Hathaway shirt and a Brooks Brothers suit, and was agitating a pair of old bone knitting needles in his swift fingers.

Following Carol as she advanced into the room, I noticed that there was something taking shape within the hooked tips of those needles, a shapeless shape, with an invisible glare of weightless bulk. It hurt my eyes to look at it, but I made them keep staring. It seemed—in its elusive, shimmering way—to be a sort of bootie. For an awfully big baby, but a bootie, nonetheless.

"Peter!" said Carol, halting halfway to him.

He looked up from his knitting with a pleasant smile. "Carol!" he said. "How nice! I wasn't expecting you . . ." Even though he'd looked up, his fingers never ceased their twisting, twining, darting movements with the needles. If he saw me, he gave no sign.

Carol, taking another step, halted and swore lightly under her breath. "Be careful of the furniture," she said to me. "I just raked a shinbone on a coffee-table."

"I don't see any furniture," I complained helplessly.

She gestured toward where Petel Stykes was furiously manipulating the bone needles. "He's woven the probability of our seeing the furnishings out of the seine."

So that's what it was; one of those sock-shaped hand-nets, a seine. "Why a seine?" I asked, puzzled.

"To catch up events, of course," said Carol. "Only the missing yarn allows events to

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happen. He's blocked our view of the furnishings, and the probability of our crossing the room to him."

"Why?" I said, at sea.

"Because," said Carol, never taking her eyes from that patient knitter at the end of the void, "if we once get to him, we can unravel the seine and bring things back where they belong."

I took a step forward. The door receded behind me, but Peter Stykes remained the same relative distance away, as though he and I were passengers in a railroad coach, and no matter how fast I urged the train forward, he remained at his end of the coach and I at mine. It was creepy.

"You can't hope to win, you know," said Stykes to Carol. "If you're hoping for help from Aunt Barbara, forget it. I've already tied off the probability of her arrival here." His smile, while still pleasant, deepened into something almost triumphant. "Now why don't you be a good girl and go home, to enjoy life while you can?"

"While I can?" said Carol, snatching at the same phrase that had caught my attention. "Peter, what are you up to?"

His flickering fingers paused a moment, and he held up the seine, nearly completed. My overstrained eyes made out a sort of crisscross pattern to its weave, an alternation of black threads and white, in that misty refulgent thing.

"You see?" he said, softly. "The black yarn holds back impossibilities, the white holds back possibilities; I am using equal skeins of both . . ."

"Peter—!" Carol's voice was a frightened gasp. "You'll stop *everything!*"

He shook his head, sardonically confident. "Not quite." From a pocket of his suit he lifted a short twist of yarn, black with the barest thread of white showing within it. "I've left myself out, you see," he mocked. "When the seine is complete, *I* will be the only probability. Then, alone in the void, I will recreate things, a thread at a time, to suit myself."

"Peter, you can't!" cried Carol, stumbling forward toward him against the invisible furniture of that endless room. It was like watching a person on a treadmill. Her frantic steps brought her no nearer the sorcerer, though she was some distance ahead of me, now. And yet at the same time, he was no further from me than he had been when I'd entered. It made my head hurt, trying to comprehend our situation.

But one thing remained uppermost in my mind: He had yet to indicate he'd seen *me* . . .

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I thought of Carol's injunction to just *be*. To be myself. I thought hard. What was wrong? Where was I *not* being myself? Then I had it.

By staying in that room, by being present in the home of such a dangerous character, I was acting against all my instincts. My heart had been urging me to flee from the time I saw that ominous black-and-silver door, and I had not followed its urgings. That was the hitch. Only my fascination, and my concern for Carol had kept me.

Hoping she'd understand, I did what my agitated heart told me. I turned and raced for the door to the hall . . .

The room gave a shiver, I felt a dizzying wrench, and then I found myself standing behind Peter Stykes, looking across the impassable void at Carol.

It made sense, in a goofy way. If heading for him left you where you were, then heading *from* him should get you right to him.

"Peter, please!" Carol was saying.

"Enough," said Stykes, impatiently, his hands taking up the needles once more. "Your presence is annoying to me." His hands moved swiftly, and I saw a trailing end of black-and-white yarn being woven into that net. Carol. He was knitting her out of existence!

"No!" I yelled, grabbing him by the shoulder and spinning him to face me. His face was white and startled as he came around, and I realized he *still* couldn't see me. I didn't know why; I could only assume our oppositeness had something to do with it. His hands were coming up to defend himself against his unseen aggressor. Invisible to him or not, I didn't want to run up against those sharp bone needles. Moving almost instinctively, I shot out a hand and wrenched the seine off the needles, then put a hand flat against his chest and shoved him violently onto the floor. His flailing arm snagged a trailing coil of yarn, and it snapped free of the net—Carol cried out, *"Ray!"*, her voice terrified.

And I was standing alone atop a strawberry ice cream mountain, ankle-deep in whipped cream . . .

The ice cream beneath my feet was cold and oozy, and I felt myself starting to sink. Dazed at the transition, I staggered stupidly down a glistening pink slope, then began to slide, a bow-wave of sweet, sticky cream angling up from under my skidding shoes as I plunged toward a deep valley. The slope was fringed with quivering pine trees of mint jelly, green and glossy, as I careened by, covered with dripping pink

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droplets of froth, and far below me—though approaching fast—I saw the dark blue serpentine of a deep river of blueberry syrup. The slope became perilously steep, and I found myself flat on my back, moving dangerously fast toward that sluggish stream, torrents of friction-melted ice cream spraying icily up into my cuffs, under my shirt, all over my face . . . The surface of the thick blue liquid was a bare hundred yards away when I had the sense to rip a long tough strand from the seine I clutched—

I was astride a lazy eight-legged creature, under a dull red sun that filled half the sky, one of many such riders in a long procession toward a distant city of glinting golden spires. The other riders were humanoid, sort of, dressed in nothing but silky breechclouts, and shining a luminous off-green through their translucent skins. I sniffed the air, and found it to be an unpleasant mixture of methane and ammonia, with the barest hint of sulphur dioxide present. Ordinarily, I'd have wondered why the ammonia didn't sting my eyes, but I was too concerned trying to breathe. Even as some of my companions began turning to see this odd gasping creature, I was snapping another thread, the first I could find—

"Graaa!" chorused the horde of copper-armored horsemen.

"Raaagh!" shrieked a plunging rank of thousands of tall creatures garbed in lustreless iron. A trumpet blast rang out over the rocky battlefield, and the two lines charged at one another, the horsemen lowering barbed lances toward the running footsoldiers in their iron sheaths, and the two ferocious alien armies rocketed toward each other with the startling speed of a veritable stampede . . . And me right in the middle, in my ice-cream-spattered suit. I tore off another cowlick of thread—

"Nay," whimpered pale Desdemona, "my lord, I have not been unfaithful!"

Othello, the Moor, his face hot with rage, clutched her by the throat with one hand, and pointed the other right at me, sitting up groggily in the lady's four-poster. "Then who the hell is *he?*" he shrieked. Oh well. I ripped again—

The rainbow shimmer of enormous butterfly-wings caught my eye, and I realized that they were growing out of my shoulder-blades, and that the ground seemed queasily far below me. However, I seemed to be gliding smoothly enough, and the air was warm and soothing as it

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flowed by, so I had a little time to think out my situation.

Being a metaphysician, I had a pretty good inkling what was wrong. Possibility and probability and impossibility are entangled, one with the other, all interdependent. If a thing is to be probable, it must first be possible; for a thing to be possible, there can exist no hint of its impossibility, and— Well, I had gummed things up. Where one could once say a thing was "possible, but not probable", such as the likelihood of all the moving molecules in a glass of water moving the same way at the same time (with the result that the entire glassful might fly off into the air), my fumbles with Aunt Barbara's event-net had switched the phrase to "probable, but not possible". Even if a thing could not be, there was now more probability for it than against it.

My problem, as I soared on my temporarily-probable butterfly pinions, was to go over that seine and try to locate the right threads to get me back to *where* I had been, and to *when*.

I looked at that blurry, black-and-white tangle. It was kind of scary, when I thought of all that I held in my hands. A slight tug at the wrong strand, and I might find myself on an ocean bottom, or on a burning sun, or—Anywhere at all. And anywhen.

Then there was the problem of which thread was which: I knew from listening that black was impossibles, and white was possibles. But did that mean that removing black would *stop* impossibles, or *start* them? I'd been a little too frantic, on the mountain, in that hostile air, and on that battlefield, to pay attention to which type of thread I'd pulled. But now I had to be careful. My relatively safe locale gave me enough respite from emergency to think straight.

I looked as closely as possible at that hard-to-see tangle, and did some figuring. Each twist of yarn had a meaning, and each twist had about twenty separate threads in it, and each thread had at least a hundred kinks, and the entire seine must have held about a thousand twists, not to mention the snag-happy surface of each thread-kink, with its countless minute barbs, which is what makes wool so itchy. I tried to multiply it out, but the number was beyond me. Especially since each addition or removal would change the relative status of every other barb, kink, thread, and twist, making it impossible to compute.

Guesswork was much too perilous.

And then I saw one dangling thread, the one that Peter Stykes had been about to weave tightly into the net. The tiny curling

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strand that stood for Carol Ellers . . .

"Hell," I said aloud, "*she'd* know the way out!"

Without a moment's delay, I grabbed the trailing end and snapped it free of the net—

Carol appeared facing me across the warm blue air, her eyes wide and dazzled. "Ray—!" she squeaked, her own lustrous set of wings beating gently in the breeze. "Where's Peter?"

With sudden insight, I realized that I must have yanked her right out of the very instant I'd last seen her. She had no idea that I'd been zooming about through time and space for nearly an hour of subjective time.

"You tell me," I said, handing her the seine. "I have had my fill of wild experimentation." Briefly, I told her what I'd gone through.

"You poor thing," she said when I finished. "But I'll bet you believe me *now!*"

Just like a woman. Getting the last word in an argument before starting anything else.

"All right, already," I grumbled. "You win. Your aunt *is* one of those Norns, and Stykes *is* a sorcerer, and this woolly tangle *is* eternity-on-a-stick, for want of a better term. But what can we *do* about it?"

"Destroy Peter Stykes, of course," said Carol.

"Not *that* again," I groaned. "You *had* your chance to fill him full of jellybeans; why didn't you?"

She smiled wistfully. "I thought you could stop him by yourself. It was—well—easier than shooting him down in cold blood. I *was* once engaged to him, after all. And since he couldn't see you, you had the advantage."

"Say, that reminds me," I said, bobbing a bit closer to her to avoid dampening my wing-scales in a passing cloud, "how come I could see him, but he couldn't see me?"

"Because you are good and he is evil," she said simply. "Opposites, for all practical purposes."

"So why could *I* see *him*, then?" I persisted.

"Because evil is the absence of good, but good can always have a bit of evil in it; maybe you cheat at cards, or something."

"That doesn't make sense," I complained.

"Yes it does," she said brightly. "It's as though good were a tooth, and evil a cavity. You can have a tooth with a cavity, but you can't have a cavity without a tooth!"

"You mean, I'm good, but I could use a gold filling?"

"Exactly," she said, delighted at my apparent aptitude.

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I gave it up. "Well, anyhow, since I've failed to destroy Stykes, how about you thread us back there, and you try out your size-twenty-two jellybeans on him?"

Carol sighed. "I guess it's the only way." With that, she turned the net about in her hands, seeking the right strand, then took a small white snippet between her fingers and snapped it in two—Unluckily, at that moment, I *hated* Stykes, and it must have made me evilly visible, for—

"Come back here with that!" shouted Peter Stykes, clambering to his feet beyond the void. I was nearly out the doorway with the event-net, and Carol was between me and Stykes, covering him with her .22, her eyes bright with emotion. Stykes saw the gun.

"I'm sorry, Peter, dear," said Carol, bringing up the gun, her finger tightening on the trigger.

Stykes rose on tiptoe, shouting some strange words into the air of the room, and I heard a sound behind me in the hall. It was the sound of a rope snapping. I looked behind me, and there, coming ponderously out of the dark shadows at the rear of the hall was the thing I'd seen hanging there, its face bloated by the noose, but its protruding eyes locked on my own as its grey, decaying fingers reached out for my throat.

"Shoot!" I yelled to Carol, scrambling back into the room with her. "He can *see* me, *I'm* no help!"

She fired. One shot after another cracked sharply in the void, and the air reeked chokingly of cordite. The gun fell from her fingers to the floor.

"He's still alive!" she screamed.

I looked toward him. He was throwing back his head and howling with laughter. Then he gave a careless wave of one hand, and the void vanished, the room returning at once to normalcy, in size and accouterments. Between us and Peter Stykes stood a tall cabinet, its surface gummed over with spattered jellybeans.

"I forgot about the furniture!" squealed Carol, rushing into my arms as the evil sorcerer came smilingly from behind the thing that had saved him. In the doorway behind us, the undead corpse waited further orders.

Stykes ambled lazily toward us, extending a hand toward the net, his other hand holding the bone needles. "I'll take that now, if you don't mind."

"We *do* mind," whimpered Carol, clinging tight to me, as though I could be of any help. "Stop him, Ray—"

Gulping down my fright, I held up a hand toward him. "K-keep back," I warned, my voice cracking.

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Stykes' eyes flicked behind me to that horrible thing in the doorway. "Why soil my hands with you," he mocked, "when Arnold can break you in two for me?" He crooked a finger at the monster—

And I remembered our kid games, when the boy who was *It* was after me . . .

"Tick-tock double-lock!" I cried out.

The doorway vanished, and nothing but smooth wall met my gaze. Beyond the sudden barrier, heavy fists beat upon the wood and plaster, futilely. Stykes was terrified.

"A wizard!" he choked, backing from me.

"I *am*?" I stuttered, still unable to believe what had just occurred. "I didn't know I had it in me."

"You didn't, dearie," cackled a new voice, and with a swirl of purple cloak, a wizened old lady appeared beside us, facing the evil sorcerer.

"Aunt Barbara!" said Carol, tremulously. "It was you!"

"Of course it was," the woman's old voice crackled. "You silly girl." She shook her head. "Next time my needles are stolen, *tell* me about it. I won't bite you!"

"I'm sorry," Carol said contritely. "I was just so ashamed at the way I'd been taken in, that—"

"Stop, all of you!" said Stykes, waving his arms. A stiff invisible sheath seemed to coat my limbs, and I found I could not move a muscle. Aunt Barbara and Carol were as motionless as I. Stykes, his brow sweat-beaded by the effort to maintain the spell upon us, came cautiously up to us and lifted the seine from Carol's stiff fingers. His eye fell upon the twist of wool I still held— Carol! —and he snatched it from me with a greedy smile.

"Now you'll see!" he raved. "You'll *all* see. I'm going to finish knitting this, and everything will be out of existence but *me!*"

His fingers flew over the net, the needles clicking like castanets. "There goes the tide, and the movement of the ocean," he chortled, twining and looping away. "And here—" he said, then paused. His face paled a bit, but he smiled bravely and removed a bit of fluff from a large knotty strand. He shot an apologetic glance at us. "I almost left *myself* mingled in with the population," he chuckle! weakly. The needles resumed with that knotty hunk of wool. "And here, as I tighten the loop, goes the entire population of the world!"

I tensed . . . Nothing seemed to happen. Peter Stykes looked up, saw us still standing there, and blinked. "It can't be!" he cried, holding up bits and twists of wool, raking them with his eyes.

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"Did I make an error somewhere?"

As he concentrated upon the net, his mind slipped from its maintenance-phase, and I felt the bonds that shackled me grow soft and cease to exist.

"*I'll* say you made an error!" laughed Aunt Barbara, her purple cloak blossoming behind her as she rushed at him. "You tried to wipe out a Norn! An *immortal! You idiot!*"

Her old wrinkled fingers plucked the bit of fluff that was Peter Stykes from the table where he'd laid it. She waved her hand, and a small fireball appeared in the air before her. She tossed the fluff into the hungry red orb, where it crackled, flared, and vanished. Aunt Barbara dusted off her hands. "So much for sorcerers."

Then we all staggered with a monstrous jolt.

"Whoops," laughed Aunt Barbara, peering closely at the few remaining kinks of wool on her fingers. "I seem to have tossed in August the 18th instead of Peter's clothes. Drat! A whole day lost out of the cosmos. Well — Could've been worse. At least the house is more-or-less normal again."

She turned and stared at the pile of Carol's clothing on the floor.

"Whoops," she said again. "Better keep your eyes aimed at the ceiling, young man. Carol, get your clothes on."

I gallantly shut my eyes, brushing idly at a tiny thread that clung to my palm.

"There it is!" snapped Aunt Barbara, grabbing the thread from me.

"Young man," she said sternly, as I opened my eyes, "you kept back Carol's clothes when Peter snatched her strand from you. You should be ashamed."

"I'm sorry," I said contritely, as Aunt Barbara began stuffing the net and bits and pieces of wool back into a large monogrammed knitting basket. "What can I say?"

"Say you'll marry her," snapped the Norn. "Least you can do after all the trouble you've caused her."

"Trouble *I've* caused *her*—!" I exploded.

Then Carol, dressed again, came around me and leaned into my embrace. "You will, won't you?" she said.

"Oh—" I muttered, trying not to look like an easy mark. Then I looked toward the chair on which Stykes' empty, limp clothes lay, and realized that Aunt Barbara had full control of *my* strand . . . She *could* send me back a day to disaster on the 18th. "Of course I'll marry you," I said to Carol, quickly.

Well? What would *you* have said? **THE END**

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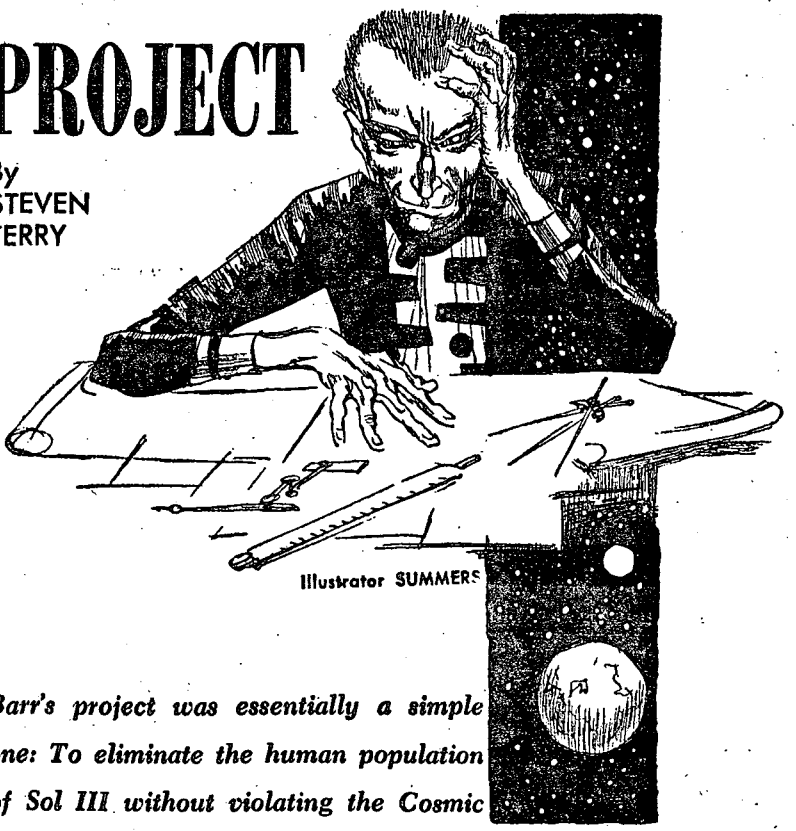
PROJECT

By
STEVEN
TERRY



Illustrator SUMMERS

Barr's project was essentially a simple one: To eliminate the human population of Sol III without violating the Cosmic Code. Getting rid of a life-form is child's play. But circumventing the code—that's an hraaba of a different odor!

THE WAR GAMES were over and the grades were scheduled to be posted tomorrow.

Tonight we would have nothing to do but wait. Under tension. Some would brood, knowing they had messed up their projects and would be reduced

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in rank or, at best, be held in grade until the next round of games.

Others would carouse, mix their snuff with a cosmos-may-care attitude, and hope against hope for a one-grade advance—the bare minimum required to maintain elite status.

Still others—not many—would envelop themselves in cloaks of serenity. These were the cadets and officers who were certain of passing. Mostly they had taken on limited-objective projects and had probably achieved their objectives. They had correctly gauged their own limitations and were on the steady but slow (oh, how slow!) road to permanent elite status—up two or three grades after each war game.

Not for me.

I'd slugged my way through the two- and three-pointers, hit a couple of five-pointers, too. I'd tried the slow-but-sure method and I didn't like it.

My faculty advisor, old 47-Grader Raak, had tried his best to hold me to five-point projects. He'd pointed out in his dry, pedantic way that the risks were out of proportion to the possible benefits.

"You're a 23-Grader now, Baar," he had said, belaboring the obvious. "You can't run the risk of throwing all that away in one grand gesture. The Committee is automatically suspicious of any student who wants to go too far too fast."

"Sure," I had replied. "Nothing personal meant, 47-Grader Raak, but that's how they got on the faculty in the first place. By taking the sure things. By advancing the state of knowledge just one imperceptible notch at a time. On my study-planet, Sol III, they have a saying, 'Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.' Well, I've never wanted to become a teacher—not as a career, anyhow."

"But, Baar," old Raak had remonstrated, "you can't be serious about taking a 25-point project. It's never been done!"

"Almost never, you mean," I had retorted. "You forget Cosmic Admiral Paag."

Old Raak had stiffened. "Why, you young squirt, comparing yourself with 150-Grader Paag! Our Commander-in-Chief for Fund Raising and Endowments! Our Supreme Toastmaster!

"Go ahead! Here's my seal of approval. Go back to Sol III for your 25-pointer, but don't come snivelling to me when you find yourself a Minus Grader with no status. Don't ask me to help when your dissertation-points are consigned to others by the Committee on Scholarships and Points-in-Aid.

"Take your 25-pointer! I wash my proboscis of it!"

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Thus encouraged, I had set forth on my make-or-break project. And now I was sweating it out. By tomorrow morning I would be either a 48-Grader and well on my way to Administrative Status or—well, the alternative was something I didn't want to think about.

My project was essentially a simple one. As a preliminary title I selected, "How the Human Population of Sol III May Be Eliminated without Violating the Cosmic Code, in Preparation for Colonization of the Planet."

The hitch, of course, was in the dependent clause. Eliminating any life-form is child's play. It's the subject usually selected for a freshman project—a one-pointer handed almost automatically to anyone who can pass the qualifying exams.

But doing the trick without violating the code—that's an hraaba of another odor!

You can't let the life-form know what you're doing to it, for example. And you can't use external force. Furthermore, you can't wind up with a set of conditions that would make the subject planet unfit for colonization without a good deal of heavy restoration work by our Reconstruction Battalions and our Public Art Commission.

And, for the clincher, some joker had put a time limit on the whole operation. No dissertation could be accepted, regardless of its other merits, unless its objective could be achieved theoretically within the time elapsed from the beginning of one set of war games to the beginning of the next—the standard galactic semester. Translated into Sol III time, that gave me exactly 60 years as my theoretical limit.

The purpose of the time limitation is obvious. The academic mind, accustomed to grubby, painstaking accumulation of bits and pieces of knowledge, cannot admit the possibility that there is any other way of adding to worldkind's store of information. Try to talk about the imaginative leap, the intuitive bridging of fragmentary data in several fields of learning, the grand conclusion—and smell how far you get!

The time limitation serves to keep each student within his sub-sub-classification of a subfield of learning—a happy state of affairs, from the viewpoint of the cautious scholar. It gives everyone a little something to do—whether student or faculty member. Well, I wasn't buying any.

I'd have to find a way to solve my problem within the time limitation and without breaking the problem into bits and pieces, each of which might promptly be designated a proper subject

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for other students' dissertations.

I was itching, of course, to get into the field where the real work had to be done. A good deal of my work had to be experimental. When I hit the right combination I'd know it—and the theoretical possibilities were already shaping up in my mind.

But with 47-Grader Raak *and* the Committee *and* the war games tutorial staff alerted to my unorthodox leanings, I'd have to make doubly sure all the deadly, dull preliminaries were neatly packaged and tied with a sweet-scented ribbon before I plunged into the actual work that would pay off.

I've known of cases where the field work was brilliant and the candidate had been flunked ingloriously. Take the case of my sibling, Graat. He'd made the 15th Grade and was on his way to 20. Something about Gene Inversion as an Aid to Regressive Aging in Acid-Breathing Life Forms.

Well, he succeeded, all right, within the limitations set by his faculty advisor. But the Committee never even sniffed his tape. Why? Because 54-Grader Blaag, chairman of the Committee, noted that Graat's bibliography failed to include a reference to an obscure footnote in an ancient freshman dissertation. The freshman, of course, had been Blaag. And, on checking, we found that the footnote itself had to do with Gene Reversion in the Presence of Emotional Blocks—a factor that had nothing whatsoever to do with Graat's field of investigation.

And let me tell you, if we had that Regressive Aging process right now we'd be well on our way to winning the war in the acid-based sectors. As it is, we have to sit helplessly by as the acid-breathers reach out into zone after zone, converting that good sweet sulphuric acid and formaldehyde into useless by-products like oxygen. But that's another story. I just thought you'd like to get a whiff of the kind of thing I was up against.

Anyhow, there I was, wasting precious time working up a bibliography, summarizing the literature in the field, taping my proposed objectives, procedures and definitions of terms, shaping my questionnaire and devising a method of dealing with the responses in a statistically acceptable manner.

And all the while I knew it was a tremendous cipher. There was no literature in the field. Nobody had even theorized about approaching the problem. Nobody could answer my questions—nobody outside of Sol III, that is, and I was forbidden to go into the field until after my preliminary investigation had been tabulated and evaluated.

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So, I did what had to be done. I invented a literature, available in inaccessible places. I shaped semantically acceptable questions and solemnly programmed them on the intra-system communicator and submitted them to the standard 2,000,000-being panel for answers. The answers were given on a 1 or 0 basis, and seldom has a computer had fed into it so many 0's and so few 1's.

Well, I worked the whole thing up into the acceptable sight-sound-smell form, taped it, showed it to the Committee, made the five minor changes demanded, re-submitted it and finally got the go-ahead sign.

One-third of the game period wasted!

Well, I finally was allowed to hop to Sol III. The only addition I had to make to the standard field kit was an odor repressor, for I'd done both my five-pointers on that planet and could get along on minimum equipment, converting what I needed from native resources as I went along.

For my experimental group I selected a concentration of population in an area called The City of New York. That gave me the bare minimum of 8,000,000 population units to work with. Anything less would have been considered an inadequate sampling.

A minor annoyance was my control group. It had to be of the same size as the experimental group and in much the same socio-economic-biological situation. I settled on an area called London. Because the geographical spread was much greater than my experimental area I had to sweat it out until I received Committee approval. By that time, I guess the Committee was so sure I'd fail that it decided to give me some leeway.

Now, in most field studies it's easy to fulfill the preliminary requirements. Not so in this case.

Requirement No. 1 is to isolate the groups with which we work. That's easy with primitives who aren't going anywhere anyhow and who can't communicate over any meaningful distance. But Sol III's human population, however primitive on our Scale of Criteria of Maze Problem Solving, could do one thing well —they communicated and communicated and communicated.

I wasn't allowed to throw a wave block over the two areas—comes under the heading of using external force. So I did the next best thing. I converted available native materials into various items of value, including currencies, and through a series of boring and time-consuming transactions established ownership of all means of communication in the areas involved.

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I don't want to waste your time explaining alien mores, so I won't try to define "ownership". Suffice it to say that it means something like control. The best analogy I can suggest is this: Suppose our Commander-in-Chief for Fund Raising and Endowments could not invade the planets of uncooperative beings for contributions to the University and was forced to give them something in return for whatever they contributed. In that case, the uncooperative ones would "own" what we gave them.

I know how difficult it is for you to envision such a situation —it would make the office of Commander-in-Chief meaningless. But we'll get nowhere if I have to stop to explain these concepts. Just brush up on your notes in Vivopology 301.

Well, now that I had my experimental and control groups isolated I naturally went into Procedure A and split myself *into as many simultaneously multiple* entities as necessary to supervise all parts of the work.

In New York, my best working entity was Barnaby Carruthers. In that guise. I made myself president (similar to Admiral) of Trans-Metropolis Communications, Inc. Early in the game I called in a human being named John Wilson Watts, a vice president.

"Good morning, John," I said. Apparently I had hit the right note. If I had called him Watts he would have been dejected, in anticipation of being discharged. If I had called him J. W. he would have been elated, in anticipation of being promoted to my position as soon as I was named Chairman of the Board (similar to Grand Admiral for Maintenance of Chalk and Erasers). As it was, my use of the designation "John" told him he would continue in gainful employment.

"John," I continued, "I have here a harmless gimmick which I would like you to place in the circuits of our radio and television transmitters. It is experimental and I do not wish our competition to know about it." (A white lie; I owned all the competition.)

"But B. C.," he replied, "I am merely a vice president. I don't know how to do anything practical, like installing a gimmick."

"Listen, Watts," I said sternly. Then I sat back and waited.

He took the gimmick in his hands, jutted out his jaw and walked firmly to the door.

"Thanks, John," I said, "and if you succeed in this little venture, I'll have something interesting to tell you—J. W."

He went out of there as if he were wearing a three-power anti-grav unit.

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That was *one* part of the program I didn't have to worry about.

The gimmick, of course, was a sub-sub-sub-liminal transmitter of my own invention. To make sure it could not be interferred with, I had keyed it to my own odor-emanation pattern which cannot be duplicated by any other being in the universe.

In rapid succession, and occasionally simultaneously, I assumed the guises of Warwick Worthington, TV newscaster, Stinky Von Hagen, radio and TV comedian, Ordway Hoty-Effingham, page boy, and Northrup Ung, maintenance engineer. In these guises, I had no difficulty whatsoever in feeding the transmitter with test materials required to build up my body of experimental data.

For example, one day I sent out word to all females aged 20 years on August 12, with red hair, green eyes and sweet dispositions. I instructed them, subliminally, of course, to go to the nearest policeman and bite his left ear.

My prior investigation had disclosed that I could expect to find 32 females answering the description. That day, 32 policemen in New York suffered from severe pains in their left ears on account of having been bitten by aforesaid females.

My control group, in London, exhibited no ear-biting tendencies. In the guise of Sir Cholmondely Houghton I made a thorough check. I did discover, however, that at a place outside the control area several cases of ear-biting had occurred. It is possible that stray sub-liminal waves had somehow been beamed to Dublin, but investigation disclosed that similar incidents involving red-haired, green-eyed, 20-year-old females had occurred from time to time in the past, and so I concluded that my experiments had nothing to do with what happened in Dublin. I therefore saw no reason to report these incidents.

Well, I'm sure you are not interested in the dull details of scholarly investigation. Everything has to be checked and rechecked. Conditions have to be altered one at a time. Suffice it to say that I went through a whole range of experiments including:

Electing Joseph Stalin mayor of New York, with a 100% vote, although he wasn't on the ticket, having been dead for some time.

Solving the traffic problem by causing all drivers of taxis and trucks to drive their vehicles into the East River within one 24-hour period.

Disabling the financial, advertising, publishing and insurance establishments of the city by

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causing all the operators of coffee carts simultaneously to dump their morning coffee-break supplies into the sewers of the metropolis.

All the while, I was stepping up my range and perfecting my technique. Now I was ready for the "big one"—testing to see whether it was possible to eliminate the human population of the planet without violating the cosmic code.

I fed my transmitter, impressed my odor-emanation pattern upon it, and waited.

Within 12 hours, all the males in New York had killed all the females.

In London, nothing happened.

With 24 hours, half the males had killed the other half—in New York.

In London, nothing continued to happen.

I had achieved all my objectives within the time limitation. The 25 points were in the bag.

And now I waited to learn whether the Committee would agree with me. Tomorrow morning I would be a 48-Grader. I could just smell the odor of it: 48-Grader Baar! But in the back of my mind the nagging thought persisted: What if the Committee should find a flaw in my work? They'd try hard enough, for sure. But what *could* happen? And then it hit me—hard.

Sure enough, the Committee didn't wait until the morning. Old 47-Grader Raak, my faculty advisor, summoned me to his office. When I entered, his nose twitched violently—a sure sign of trouble.

"Baar," he said, "you will accompany me to the Grade Room where the Commander-in-Chief himself is awaiting you."

This was serious. It looked as though all my arduous work had gone down the drain.

In the Grade Room, 150-Grader Paag, our Supreme Toastmaster and Commander-in-Chief, flanked by the 30 100-plus-Graders in the entire universe, awaited me.

"You are 23-Grader Baar?" the grand old man began. "You are the squirt with the sub-liminal ideas for eliminating populations? You are the foul-smelling, oxygen-nosed punk with an hraaba for a mother and a gnaaga for a father?

"You are hereby stripped of 25 points for fouling up the most misbegotten project it has ever been my displeasure to observe," he continued. "Minus-2-Grader Baar, dismissed."

As I automatically went through the Ceremony of Leave-Taking of Those in Authority, the Commander-in-Chief's rough voice cut me short.

"You fool," he cried, "you for-

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got to turn off the damned thing! We checked your experiment and found that you had eliminated not only the population in the test area but on the entire planet as well!"

"Your Supreme Graciousness," I replied, "that merely means—"

"—the experiment's a success," he cut in. "Yes, but when we saw what you had done we decided to send a colonization team in immediately. And we did. Thirty million of our beings in the first wave. Thirty million in the second wave. And thirty million in the final wave."

"The *final* wave?" I questioned. "That's the tenth wave, isn't it, your Supreme Graciousness?"

"Not on Sol III," he thrust back at me. "Because after losing 90,000,000 of our beings, we're not of a mind to risk any more."

"You mean that transmitter is working on our own beings?" I asked, horrified.

"Yes," he replied, with acid in his voice.

"And it's killing them off?"

"Yes."

"And it would kill them off wherever it was planted?"

The grand old man looked up sharply. "I hadn't thought of that," he said.

"And the only way to stop the danged gimmick is to change its orders—with my own odor-emanation pattern?"

"And no one else's," the Commander-in-Chief admitted sadly.

"Well," I riposted, "I'll be happy to do what I can—but, of course, my hands are tied. As a Minus-2-Grader, I'm not even allowed to leave this planet."

Old Paag sniffed. "We'll make you a brevet 5-Grader," he offered.

I started to leave the room.

"A 10-Grader, then!" he upped the ante.

"Let's be realistic," I countered. "I'd have to be at least a 50-Grader just to head a rescue expedition. That's standard operating procedure. And I'd need at least 25 additional points to be permitted to de-activate a non-experimental installation."

Paag and his Committee naturally had to agree to my terms, since I pointed out the danger of the sub-liminal waves spreading beyond Sol III and eventually penetrating the entire universe. My terms were simple: I was to be named a 151-Grader, effective immediately, outranking old Paag and naturally taking over his job.

And, as Cosmic Admiral, Commander-in-Chief for Fund Raising and Endowments, and Supreme Toastmaster, just let me catch any young squirt trying for a 25-pointer.

THE END

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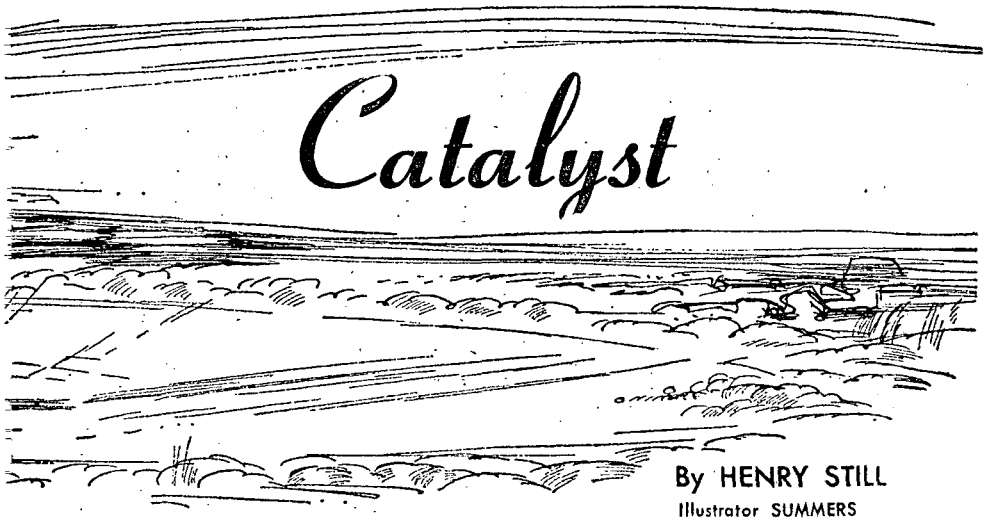
For generations the forest and the mist had kept them apart. Now crisis was to determine the future of the land—would it be two people or one?

Catalyst



By HENRY STILL

Illustrator SUMMERS

JORD KNELT beside the temple wall, this heart surging with wonder and fear. Cold summer rain streamed out of the darkness, drenching his naked torso, soaking the coarse material of his kilt, and the moss-grown stones of the temple were slippery under his hand.

Lightning flashed blue out of the low sky and he saw it again.

The City!

He closed his eyes, terrified, but the image remained. Spirals and loops of structure, misty in the rainswept night; spires of stark majesty needle-pierced the heavens until he could see no higher; gossamer spider-web bridges connected the buildings beautiful beyond imagining.

Twice the lightning had flashed; twice he had seen the City with its roots so near in the ruins he could have run to the first arched doorway.

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Jord shivered with cold and fear as thunder rumbled away and lightning flashed again.

He opened his eyes, but this time all he saw was the plank of oak above the temple door—and the words burned in the wood:

"God is War; War is God."

And the cities were gone as though they never had been. Other words, inside the temple, told him that. The cities had been unclean in god's sight, so they were blasted from the Earth.

And god made the lightning as a promise to man that the cities should never rise again.

The blood of courage that had driven Jord into the night and the storm turned to water in his thighs. He ran stumbling through the darkness, his feet sinking in the water-soaked grass, the smell of rain and lightning bitter in his nostrils.

He sprawled down the ramp to Athra's nob of earth and sobbed for breath until he could enter with dignity and calmness. He pulled open the heavy door and slipped inside.

Athra was there with his mate, Olla. But they were working at the loom and did not see him in the flickering shadow light from the guttering candle. Arlita squatted beside the tiny forge, her yellow hair fallen about her shoulders, her golden breasts tinged with scarlet from the fire. She was making a spear point from flint he had brought from the forest.

Jord leaned against the damp earth wall. A scarlet spider scuttled over one of the heavy roof beams of the cellar. He watched the firelight play upon the golden flesh of his woman and part of Jord's courage returned. He squatted beside her.

"I've seen the City," he whispered.

A chip of flint cracked loose and dropped into the fire before she looked up, her eyes widening with apprehension.

"Why did you go?" she asked. "No one else goes into the storm to dare the god."

"But I've seen the City! I had to see it and I did."

Arlita shook dumbly, tears filling her eyes. "Don't make fun of god," she said.

"I'm not making fun," he answered angrily. "I saw it. Towers and bridges and buildings so beautiful and tall they pierced the clouds."

Athra rose to his feet and came to the fire. Jord's words had carried across the smoke-filled cellar. Arlita's father was so tall his head bent below the roof-beams. His shoulder-length hair was gray.

"You saw the city?" he asked quietly, but his voice carried an

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undertone of menace. "You meddled with devilish ways until now you've seen the city."

Jord nodded, the enormity of his crime touching him with reality. The need that had driven him into the night in search of the vision dissolved to a knot of indecision.

"The City exists only for those of the devil." Athra's voice rose. "Not in 60 seasons has one of our tribe fallen before its evil. You know of Martin."

"Yes." Jord moistened his dry lips to repeat the litany "He saw the Vision and fell at the hands of Lem the Priest."

"Yes," Athra said. "Erased. With the true relic of the last Disciple."

Jord had seen this relic. The heavy pistol lay on the altar of the temple, its steel gleaming between flickering candles. And Lem, the priest, garbed in the robe of the last Disciple, a trench coat stained berry-juice purple of the General's passion.

Athra wrapped his wood fiber cloak about his shoulders.

"Where are you going?" Olla called anxiously.

"To the temple," Athra said. "Lem must know the devil is with us again."

"No!" Arlita's cry stopped him at the door. Athra paused, head bowed.

"You know the Word," he said. "Unless we guard, the City will rise again. There are so few of us to fight the evil."

"Please," Olla murmured. "The child."

Athra looked somberly at the soft, swelling contour of Arlita's belly, his brow furrowed with pain.

"Like the tree the fruit will be," he said and turned to Jord.

"You have been husband to our daughter." Athra bent and tossed a stick of pine in the fire. It caught and blazed. "I will give you until that has burned to go away from here. Then I will tell the priest."

Jord stared into the fire until the flames leaped high. Arlita's trembling hands were at his shoulders.

"Hurry!" Her mouth joined his and he tasted tear salt. She thrust his spear into his hands. "Run to the ruins."

She pushed him to the door and held him against her.

"Someday I'll find you again," she whispered fiercely.

"I'm sorry," Jord muttered. "Care for our son."

"There is no City," Athra bellowed behind them. "It is only in your stupid head!"

The door creaked shut. Jord ran into the darkness.

Inside the City there was light.

Mitchel stood at the center of rainbow color where it spilled

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through the huge prism above his head. He stared up to where the vaulted ceiling of the spire temple curved to a needle point. There the prism glittered its message of universal perfection, bathed the symbol of the Golden Atom with fire.

Mitchel lowered his gaze to the people around him. There were no more than 60 in the City. He looked a moment upon Esterlay's golden hair. Her head was bowed. Pain there, woven with tendrils of love as her thought reached his mind.

He was calm now. He turned to Mordan, the Priest, sitting cross-legged on the sacred cushion, his naked gray skull glistening softly outside the light, like a mushroom with eyes. Mordan's voice was the sound of fatigued metal breaking.

"Do you find, my son, that the light of god has cleansed you of heresy?"

Say yes, spoke the voice of fear. *Say yes,* Esterlay's thought insisted within his brain. But Mitchel shook his head.

"I saw beyond the mist," he repeated softly. "There are ruins of a city, then a forest of trees and there are people, others like ourselves, living in strange caverns in the earth."

"No! screamed the priest. "You blaspheme! There is nothing beyond the mist. The City is all under god. It has always been so. There are no ruins, no destruction. Those things are of the devil." Mordan leaped to his feet and ran to the circular wall. He waved his fingers and a window dilated open.

"There," he screamed, "the mist! See it?" He plunged his fist through the window, but it stopped as though in a soft cusion. "There is nothing beyond the mist. Do you see it?"

"I see it," Mitchel said, "but I have also seen through it."

"Then you are beyond our Mutual Intelligence." The priest's voice carried a timbre of fanaticism. "You are Moron."

The epithet, formed in the mutual mind even before the priest spoke, brought a sigh of horror from the worshippers.

"I am not Moron," Mitchel said stoutly, but fear was dissolving his certainty. "The mist was gone. I could see it clearly, broken masonry, twisted steel, and the strange people—"

"No more!" Mordan waved his hand as though to brush away vermin. "The groping of your mind has brought imperfection among us. Therefore I command our people—" his eyes swept the handful of men and women, "—I command them to exclude you from their thought. You shall go to the lower city and live or die alone. If you are seen again, you will be killed!"

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Mitchel bowed his head to hide the pain and fear.

"I will stay with you." Esterlay's thought spread like salve over the folds of his brain, but he thrust it away, fearful that the priest would include her in his ostracism.

"May I—"

The Priest turned impatiently. "What is it?"

"Where does our food come from?" Mitchel blurted. "And our clothing?"

Mordan pointed a trembling finger of rage.

"It is this search into things that are god's that has brought you to your death," he shouted. "God and the Atom are ours. They have brought us to the perfection man has dreamed through all the ages. I need only to wish—" The priest paused, his hand outstretched. A golden fruit appeared there. He bit into it gluttonishly, the juice dripping down his chin, "and my wish is fulfilled. Am I then to ask god how the Atom fills my need. WE MUST NOT QUESTION. Only the evil one questions. Leave us!"

Torn with pain and loss, Mitchel stumbled out of the temple, conscious of the hush as he passed Esterlay, her parents and the others. At the arched doorway, he ran. He must never see them again. They must never see him. Down the spiral ramp he ran, blindly down to the depths of the city where no one lived, into the mammoth rooms and empty spaces that mocked the imperfection of Man with sparkling sterility of steel and glass and stone.

His breath hurt deep in his chest.

It rained again in the night. Jord left a clear trail in the sparse grass and mud of the valley, but there was little chance of pursuit before morning. The villagers feared the dark and storm. One of the big spotted gray wood cats passed him on the way down to forage the cattle corral.

At dawn Jord climbed over a broken concrete slab and crouched behind a rusting steel girder. He was certain he could lose himself in the ruins of the City. But he could starve, there, too.

Over the edge of stone, he looked back down the valley, saw the first tendril of smoke from the communal fire. He imagined he could smell meat cooking, but it was only hunger in his guts.

Apparently Lem the Priest was waiting until his followers had eaten to organize the devil hunt.

Why should it be wrong that Jord had seen the City? For years he had heard the bitter sermons, the gospel of the old

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days when the cities fell, the legend that the devil lived within the invisible spires of stone and steel. Jord, the growing youth, had squirmed on his hard bench in the gloom of the mud temple, wondering, and afraid to be branded for his wondering.

He had been but a child when Martin saw the vision of the City and was destroyed. As Jord grew to manhood, the story of Martin and the devil and the god-riven cities became woven into one story of hatred and fear. But always a finger of curiosity teased his mind, hinting of truth beyond.

This restless need to know had sent Jord into the storm. And he had seen the City. He did not know if it really existed, or was only the product of a diseased imagination.

A stone moved behind him.

Jord whirled, half expecting to see again the dread vision that had sent him running in fear from his tribe. But only a man stood there.

Jord pressed against the broken stone, gripping his spear.

"You're out of bounds, aren't you son?" the man asked.

"Who are you?"

The man's hair was straight and long and gray, tied back with a dirty cord. In place of the tribal kilt, he wore strange green trousers of woven material. His torso was naked, the muscles of middle-age ridged with work under his sun-browned skin. He squatted and contemplated Jord with calm gray eyes.

"My name is Martin," he said. "You wouldn't remember."

"Martin!" Jord's eyes dilated. "You're dead. The priest—"

"The priest didn't shoot straight," Martin said drily. "The wound healed after a while. See?" He pointed to a scar under his left arm and a bulge of bone where the rib had mended unevenly.

"But the true relic is infallible."

"The true relic," Martin said, "is a gun, fired by human hands. It is no more infallible than you or I, no more than the bomb that destroyed the City."

Martin's blasphemy gripped Jord in a new current of fear. Perhaps he had, indeed, fallen before the devil.

"What are you doing here?" Martin asked. "The tribe avoids the ruins like poison." His voice conveyed bitterness.

"I saw the City," Jord said.

"You too?" Martin's eyebrows rose. "Then the wolf pack will be up pretty soon."

Jord nodded, uncertain which he feared most, the devil hunt and his death, or this apparition of a man already dead. But Martin didn't look dead. He pulled something out of a pock-

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et, bit off it, and began chewing. Jord felt saliva seep out behind his teeth.

"Hungry?" Martin asked. Jord nodded.

"Here, try this." The graying outcast handed Jord a small round yellow carton. The outside was flexible to the touch. Jord examined it uncertainly.

"Here. Press here."

Jord pressed his thumb against the side of the carton. The thin plastic peeled back, revealing red substance within.

"Go ahead, eat it," Martin said. "It's meat. The old people had it—I think." He pressed fingers against his temple, trying to remember. Jord wolfed the food, wiped his fingers on his thigh.

"Where did you get it?"

"Down there." Martin waved his hand vaguely. "Under the stone and steel. There's more."

"What did you mean." Jord hesitated. "You said the old people had it."

"I don't know." Martin rubbed his temples again in the habit motion. "I remember something about people, but it won't come out right. It's the vision of the city, and people lived there, and then there was war and that's all—" His voice trailed off then he asked abruptly: "Do you believe the devil lived here?"

"The Priest said—"

"To hell with him," Martin said sharply. "What do you think? If you hadn't been thinking, you wouldn't have seen the vision. Do you think *this* is evil?" He waved his hand to include the vast jumble of wreckage, and weeds growing through cracked pavement. "'God is War,' they say. If this is the work of God, why did he leave *this?* Why didn't he wipe it clean?"

Jord was shocked by the force of Martin's questions; the same questions that had teased his own mind in the past. But Jord had no answers, only bewilderment and fear.

"Do you know what this is?" Martin asked. In his hand he held a small cross bearing the spread figure of a man.

"No." Jord shook his head. "Where did you get it?"

"The first I can remember, it was in the pocket of my kilt. I kept it. Even when Lem tried to kill me, I kept it. It means something. If I could only remember—" Martin's brow furrowed, but his thought was snapped abruptly.

From down the valley came a long piercing yell, another, then a chorus with a rasping voice of viciousness and panic.

Jord started nervously.

"They're coming," Martin said calmly, "after you."

Mitchel walked softly in the high vaulted spaces of the lower City, his footsteps echoing soft

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drumbeats of terror. The people did not live here anymore in the roots of the City. They inhabited only the towers, the needle spires reaching toward heaven. Around him on the marble walls were magnificent works of art, showing man's dream through the ages, inscriptions that had lost their meaning through repetition.

Man will reach the stars.

What did that mean? What were the stars? Were stars something beyond the mist, like the ruins and people Mitchel had seen?

Man's goal is peace—lasting peace so that Man may fulfill his destiny.

Was his life in the City peace? Was this aimless existence, where every unspoken wish was fulfilled, the ultimate goal of Man?

Mitchel was afraid.

He was afraid because he was hungry and when he wished now, no food came to him. He was afraid, because if he were seen he would die. And in the wisps of thought seeping down through the hundreds of structure levels above him, he learned that Mordan the Priest was searching deliberately for him.

Mitchel hurried through an archway and pressed his back against the marble wall.

"I can show you where to hide," a voice said.

Mitchel stared fearfully into the shadows, unable to detect thought to identify the speaker.

"Who are you?" His voice echoed. "Where are you?"

The man stepped into the light. His hair was gray, his face lined, his eyes gray and clear.

"I'm not one of the people anymore," he said quietly. "Don't be frightened."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Farraday." He studied the young man carefully. "I've been waiting. When you were a child, I was ostracized by Mordan as you are. My thoughts have been with you, knowing that sometime you would find the way out."

"Out? You mean through the mist, the ruins—"

Farraday nodded, pointing to another archway where the pearl fog hung in a dense curtain.

"What is out there?" Mitchel whispered.

"I don't know," Farraday answered, "something . . ."

"You've seen it, too?"

Farraday nodded. "I've been there. I've felt the broken stone under my feet, and the dust and rusted steel—but I can't do it always. Sometimes the mist will not go away."

"How . . . ?"

"If you believe enough, it's there," Farraday said simply. "Are you hungry?" Mitchel nodded.

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Farraday handed him a yellow plastic carton, showed him how to open it. Mitchel gulped the strange meaty substance.

"I found this out there," Farraday said. "I thought the ruins were a dream, but the food didn't go away when the mist closed again."

"Then *out there* is real?"

"Sometimes," Farraday said thoughtfully. "I wish I could remember." His fingers toyed absently with a small metal object. Mitchel couldn't see what it was.

Then he no longer cared as new wonder and fear gripped him. Esterlay's groping thought was in his mind. She was near.

He looked. She stood in the high dark archway through which he had passed only a few moments before. He stumbled toward her, and stopped—almost too late.

Behind her was the gray mushroom head with flat steel eyes.

"It's Mordan!" Farraday yelled. "Run!"

Esterlay screamed. Mitchel raced toward the gray curtain in the opposite arch, passed the older man sprinting in the same direction. He felt the mist close around him, a nebulous jelly slowing his plunging legs . . .

"They're closer," Martin said, puzzled. "Lem has never led them into the ruins before."

The two men, sweaty torsos caked with dust, moved along what once had been a main boulevard. Jord had discarded his spear as useless against the devil pack. The two were forced many times to climb over the crumbling mass of smashed buildings. Behind them the valley tribe bayed like wild dogs.

"Our tracks," Jord panted, "dust everywhere." He clambered over a tilted slab of masonry and tumbled down the other side. His feet caught in the rib case of a skeleton. He stared.

"People," he whispered, "there were other people." Martin labored for breath, falling behind the younger man.

"We're lost," he panted, "I've never been in this far."

The ruins took on new character. Standing portions of the block-square buildings were lower, as though sliced cleanly by a mammoth knife that angled upward as it traveled out from the center. Smashed stone in the street was pulverized to dust and recaked by years of rain into semi-concrete.

They could move faster here, but there was nowhere to go except straight ahead, rubble blocking evasive movement. Then abruptly the ruins ended. Jord stumbled, trying to stop.

A shallow dish of glass, perhaps half a mile in diameter, lay ahead of them. Shimmering un-

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der the sun, the glazed area was rough and marbled where a gigantic fist had crushed the City into the earth. Cracks rayed out, widening as they joined at the center.

A hoarse scream of triumph rang behind them. Jord stared back, saw the purple trench coat of the Priest. The relic of the last Disciple roared. A bullet whistled past Jord's head.

"Cut back!" Martin yelled. "They'll get us both."

Behind the Priest, the other members of the valley tribe straggled out of the old wreckage in a ragged stream.

"No," Jord was already running, "across the glass. We can hide on the other side."

Mitchel burst out of the mist into violent sunlight, his feet tangled in a net of steel that once had supported a proud tower of concrete. He wrenched free and leaped ahead. Farraday scrambling behind him.

Mitchel glanced back. Not 50 paces away, Mordan the priest scuttled like a spider in pursuit, the City people crying and screaming behind him. Mitchel glimpsed Esterlay's golden hair in the sun.

But the City had vanished!

Around him lay only the pulverized wreckage of what once had been a city. Ahead a blaze of light dazzled him.

He raced across the surface, leaping the crevices raying out from the center.

Jord saw the arrow point of people break out of the ruins racing toward him.

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Shots rang out behind him. A lance of fire ripped through the flesh of his thigh. He stumbled on, paralleling a wide crevice opening into the earth.

But ahead—

Ten yards away a young man, exactly like himself, stumbled forward.

A burst of light in his brain . . .

A shout of comprehension . . .

And Jord Mitchel staggered to a halt, blood streaming down his thigh, at the exact point where the giant bomb, many years ago, had centered its crushing ball of destruction.

Sobbing for breath, he was aware of Martin Farraday's gentle hands under his arm.

Arlita Esterlay, his woman, ran forward crying for him.

All the people were there, but they were one people.

And Lem Mordan, the last general, rushed forward along the crevice, his face twisted with hate, saliva trickling from the corner of his mouth.

He leaped at Mitchel lashing with the pistol.

Jord crouched and threw himself forward, felt the shock as the priest-general's body struck him and glanced aside. The general's scream of death echoed out of the crevice as he fell.

Arlita bandaged Jord's thigh. Confusion swirled in his brain.

"I didn't mean to kill him."

"It's just as well," Martin Farraday said, "he was incurably mad."

"Why did he want to kill me?"

"He was a general without an army, but his breed must wield power. He could tolerate no deviates, but we deviated."

"But what are we?" Jord whispered. "What *were* we?"

"We are the survivors," Martin said, his gray eyes serene with new power and hope. "We *were* insane, all of us thrown into the same pattern of schizophrenia.

"For half a century we—in the city and over the world—lived in fear of total war. On one side we were obsessed with future mechanical perfection in our world. On the other, we were certain of destruction and return to savagery. The hope was the same, the fear identical for all of us. When the bomb fell, we all split into the same massive group insanity."

Farraday fingered the cross absently, possessively.

"But what brought us back," Jord asked.

"I had this," Farraday said, holding up the tiny crucifix. "You had a questing mind. Fear and the chase, perhaps the actual reflection—seeing themselves converging across this bomb crater—was the catalyst. "Come," he said, "I remember where they stored the food. We'll build again."

THE END

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WE REGRET . . .

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Here is the lesson taught by man, but not learned by him: It is not enough to "Know"; even the mightiest of beings must sometimes yield to that which he can only "feel."

IN THEIR little runabout space boats the two came down from opposite ends of Time. Upon meeting they clasped hands in their own manner, which is to say they clasped nothing, but a delicate smell came out like two half-atoms burning. "We'll be fair," said Bauf Ga, "absolutely, of course."

"Right," said Gu, "we must assay coldly the work of our special parties. You remember how, when they came back, they were sure the job was in the hands of total disintegration."

Then they stepped down to where the smoking cinder floated and spun in the murked sunlight. They walked with their face-knots masked, and they did not speak now to one another. They parted and went opposite ways. They met on the dark side of the cinder that turned and was shaped like a moon. They waited until the dark side was again in light. They shook in wondering negation and thumped off at opposite ways again, in new directions. They met again and wordlessly shook their emissions. They sat down and waited and pondered while the cinder whirled from darkness to light eight turns. They were not waiting for anything exactly, and yet Something caused them to ponder still.

"As I thought," said Bauf Ga, "there is nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Yes," agreed Ga, "there is nothing. And yet, as I talk to you across these charred places I have the feeling that something strange is flying across the emissions. As though formed yet weightless gases were leaving from out of this char."

"Poof!" said Gu, "You talk as though you had scorched your knot on a sun. There is nothing but the usual smells and gases of burning here. And that must soon be integrated with the Vast

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Whirlies until it will not differ from the billions of millons of burnings that have taken place before."

"It may be as you say," said Ga, "and I am one to hope so. And yet, something keeps sifting at me through the gases. There was a Wish-God, as you know, invented by the Crawly-Walkies who played here. Since this—ah, accident to his inventors do you suppose he is hunting something—someone—us!?"

"Poosh and toosh," said Gu, "you'll feel better next Greater Turn."

"I must! I must! For should the God of the Crawly Walkies find still growing in me a strangeness I feel now I could not be a Knowlie. I would not be fit. I could not rocket, as I have so long done, all through the great grey envelope of Space Immensity, inspecting the machinery coldly. I could not take the cool view."

"Poosh pish pash," replied Gu, "the stories about the Crawly-Walkies on this little speck, and their Wish-God, have caught something in you. Shall we call it time-sickness? But come, I think we are through here. Sail with me back to my department of Suth Know. We'll feast on breast of comet there. We'll nip a bit of the white milk of the Way. We'll enjoy my new arrangement of the Music of the Stars. Then return, rested and rededicated, to your department of Nath Know next Greater Turn."

"Oh, but hoosh," said Ga, "hoosh and tremble. For they come. E'en while this cinder burns they appear, another inspecting party. I've been expecting them! For I have read the Words. Once, long ago, in the language of Time. And more of late in the Space language. They will search as we searched, but they come with a different manner.— Let us step behind this ledge of smoke."

So the Knowlies stepped behind a ledge translucent. And the Spouls came out of the sunlight, riding on wings that were pieces of the rays of the Sun of Earth. They were all paler than the farthest star is pale in the Space Immensity, and yet in their combinations they were radiant. Their voices were whispers of sunlight stroking sunlight, and their faces were not masked. They stepped on the smoking cinder as though it were home of the Spouls, and they waded in ashes which they parted with their tears. They stooped and felt in the char thousand-millions of times, and they picked up little doll shapes which they proudly held in their hands. They faced them all to the Sun of Earth and made great marks

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in the smoke, two lines that crossed at right angles. Then they faced the ledge behind which the two Knowlies sat. "We know you watch us," they cried in a great chorus at the Knowlies, "peering from behind ledges of prearranged burning. And we know that because of your immense blindness you see not very much at all. We regret your tragedy sincerely."

The Knowlies almost trembled behind the ledge of smoke. Then they remembered their vast knowledge of the Space-Time machinery, and they stepped forth bold, with arrogance in their bearing and much bravado. "We have watched you," said Bauf Gu, "from behind this clearing wall. We regret to see you take such interest in what you find, which is nothing, nothing except strange shapes welded from the ash in great heat. That those shapes resemble somewhat the Crawly-Walkies that were here and were induced to set off this all-taking fire is not entirely coincidental. And yet, it all means nothing, hardly a diversion in the Great Time-Space mechanics."

"But what is that goes by?" Bauf Ga could not help asking. "Weightless, formed and clear—a gas most alien to all that I have encountered. I only feel it going by or hovering as I wait here or walk here. Is there not a place we can take it where we can shut it away? It disturbs me." Gu scowled his irritation over the weakness of Ga.

"There is a place," said the Spouls facing into the Sun and softly letting their wings trail down like shields along their sides, "to which we shall take it, surely.— It cannot be shut away."

Something about the strange light of the sun-ray wings of the Spouls and the tender way they held the burned faces of the ash-dolls impressed even the stern Bauf Gu. "Where is that place?" he scowled, asking against his will. "And if there is such a place, is the stench not terrible there?"

But the Spouls answered only, "You have passed there many times, Bauf Gu, and through, yet saw it not nor felt it, 'knowing' too much. What we spirit and soul-furnished Spouls know to be ALL, you in your brilliant, precise misdirection 'know' to be NOTHING. We regret . . ."

Then they spread wings, which were of the rays of the Sun of Earth, and they disappeared, tenderly bearing faces of ash-dolls.

THE END

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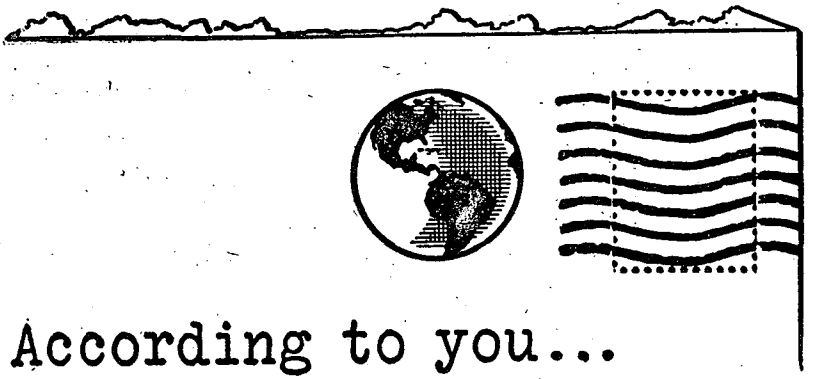

According to you...

Dear Editor:

I just finished reading your November issue—good as always—but I must take exception to a letter by one Sam Cahan.

You, Mr. Cahan, are an amazing individual, no really. I mean it! You say that *Fantastic* "has always been a rotten magazine." And I quote your exact words. Then, just to satisfy my curiosity, will you please tell me why in the Universe you spend money and effort in obtaining it? Is it just to have an inanimate object, put together at considerable effort of many people, most of whom you will never meet, to vent your personal frustrations on, with no fear of retaliation?

In my opinion, the sf magazines that remain on the stands today are far better than they were when I first discovered them about 10 years ago. (Probably would have found them sooner but I had school and dating on my mind prior to that.) I have copies of now non-existant magazines that I re-read occasionally along with the rest, and it always occurs to me that the best in quality always seems to stay despite changing fads and outside pressures of different types.

I notice that I said that I "have" copies, above, when it should have been "had." Our home burned—in fact exploded on the Sunday before Labor Day and most of my collections of Science Fiction—approx. 2500—went up in smoke, so I'll have to start over again.

Mrs. Lucky Rardin
245 E. Oak View
Oak View, Calif.

● *Any generous readers with duplicates in their collection care to start Mrs. Rardin off on her re-collection?*

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Dear Editor:

You really laid an egg with that November issue. Even Fritz Leiber, who almost always comes up with something good, was operating way below par. Oddly enough, the best story in the issue was one of the shorts, "A Diversion For The Baron" by Porges. Glad to see Porges will be back next issue—he never fails to entertain me.

As is almost always true, the cover was excellent. Schomburg came through magnificently on his first *Fantastic* cover. More from him, by all means. Not as much can be said for the inside artwork. Douglas' sketchings for Poul Anderson's story were slightly worse than terrible.

You don't recognize a good idea when you see one. The idea I'm referring to was the one by Harry Thomas, which was to enlarge the mag thirty pages, and devote just five measly pages to a fan column. You said you were holding down the price for the fan's sake. We fans won't mind the price going to fifty cents if you'll enlarge the mag. Look at it this way: *Galaxy* and *Analog* both cost fifty cents. Compare their sales with the sales of *Fantastic*. Think that one over . . .

Michael Padgett
3230 Washington Road
Martinez, Georgia

● *We are comparing . . . and you'd be surprised at the results. In our opinion the great majority of our readers would not want the price of the magazines raised in order to see a fanzine column in it.*

●*One last word in the Spencer-Moskowitz "friendly controversy" on M. P. Shiel:*

Dear Editor:

As to whether Hogarth, in *The Lord of the Sea*, knew of his Jewish ancestry: during the speech of old Hogarth which Sam quotes, young Hogarth is *unconscious!* All he hears is "Richard, you are no son of mine"—then he passes out from a knife wound and "old Hogarth continued to ears that did not hear." Richard does not learn of his true parentage until the next to the last chapter.

Also in the next to the last chapter, but before learning the truth about himself, Hogarth repents of expelling the Jews from England: "I was mad when I gave that order. It won't do!"

Comparison of Shiel with Eichmann is unjust, Sam, because what-

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ever his prejudices Shiel never proposed violence against Jews. I've already conceded that he regrettably accepted certain stereotypes of racial and religious groups; and as far as this goes I condemn it as fervently as Sam does. But Shiel's thinking did not end there—he also recognized good qualities, and considered them more truly characteristic than the stereotypes. At least, that's my impression from *The Lord of the Sea* and from the sometimes eccentric but basically amiable and compassionate personality that (for me) emerges from Shiel's works as a whole (in which, by the way, these questions are not usually prominent).

Finally, I suggest that *Fantastic's* readers follow Sam's suggestion and try some of Shiel's books to see for themselves. They may find in them, as I have, some exasperating qualities but also much that is stimulating and entertaining.

Paul Spencer
8 Bayview Avenue
Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Dear Editor:

The November *Fantastic* is to be praised for the better stock paper. It does veritable wonders for the cover illustration. Very slick looking. The cover, by the bye, was one worthy of praise itself; Mr. Schomburg is a most welcome newcomer to the *Amazing-Fantastic* scene. If this cover doesn't attract several hundred new buyers, you might just as well call it a day. On second thought, stick around for a while—we old faithfuls are still buying!

Nothing really outstanding in the way of fiction this month; however, I'd rate most of the stories in the "very good" category. Slesar's "Long Shot" was an enjoyable bit of light fantasy, the likes of which pops up in *Fantastic's* pages too infrequently. Mr. Leiber's "Deadly Moon" was all too rousing and tried to cram too much plot-action-idea in too short a space. The "atmosphere" of the story held it together; certainly Mr. Leiber is one of the most adroit mood-weavers in the business.

Bobby Gene Warner
5316 Old Chenez Highway
Orlando, Florida

(continued on page 130)

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ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

Dear Editor:

Good for you, at last *Fantastic* will look a little better, rather than like a poor relation of *Amazing*. I am referring, naturally, to the stylish new type face for the cover. I have never liked the face that has been used on the title in past issues, it appeared rather average and didn't really convince me that there was anything unusual or thought provoking between the covers. I think that the new face, combined with the subtitle "stories of imagination" which reflects the fantastic nature of many of the stories as opposed to pure science, is most fitting.

I have only one complaint about the November issue, which otherwise was better than average. The short story "A Diversion for the Baron" was like Kate Wilhelm's piece in the September *Amazing*. Neither of the two stories is really science fiction, but merely mundane stories with an element of science in the plot. I know it's tough to get good s-f these days, but please try to avoid these kind of stories.

David B. Williams
714 Dale Street
Normal, Illinois

● *We're glad you think we improved our looks. We constantly keep trying to improve what's behind the facade.*

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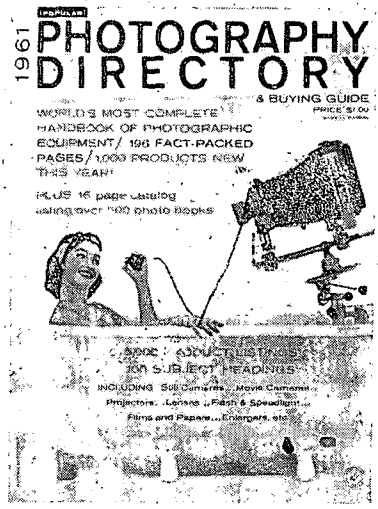
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